



AGE OF COSMIC EXPLORATION

BOOK 01

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Age of Cosmic Exploration

(大宇宙时代)

by

Zhtty

Synopsis

Endless sky and infinite space, the cosmos isn't some paradise waiting to be found, it is full of darkness and danger, death and terror of the great unknown. However, for that glittering swath of blue, we have no fear! For the longevity of men, we have no regrets! Nothing shall stand in our way because it is finally our time, our age! The age of cosmos exploration!

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is entirely coincidental.

Chapter 1: Chaos!

Yao Yuan had been straining his ears for hours trying to discern any would-be commotion from **beyond the shutters**, but try as he might, he couldn't hear anything. Even under broad daylight there was nary a squeak; the street outside was as silent as a ghost town, and the eerie calm was a stark contrast to the erratic chaos just days before.

The reason was probably because enemy troops had already pillaged the area. The

sorry state the room Yao Yuan found himself in was strong support for this supposition. The room was part of a once bustling shop that belonged to his friend, but one could barely discern that fact from the condition it was in. The place was utterly trashed and all valuables were gone; only dirt and debris was strewn all over the floor now.

Long before the insurgence, that friend and his family moved away from the city to seek refuge by the countryside, and as an afterthought, he left the key to his business with Yao Yuan.

Anticipating the impending chaos, Yao Yuan made a brash yet strategic decision: he ransacked the place and undeployed the shutters, leaving the space in plain view, before retreating into its basement. The hope was for the dilapidated scene to deter possible pillagers, and thus preventing the discovery of his hiding spot.

Later, when the pandemonium reached its height due to confrontations between the lawless army and the anarchic populace, thanks to his ingenuity, the spot Yao Yuan was in was left relatively unchecked.

There were a few incidents of course, but none of them were of note. The worst was a case of arson that only managed to scorch the outer walls due to a lack of incendiary materials. Incidentally, that made the place look even more like a deserted ruin.

Just like that, while the world above raged on, Yao Yuan had spent the past five days underground in relative peace. On the morning of the sixth day, he slunk up to the surface to survey his surroundings. His immediate area was clear of human activity, but it was not

until he dropped the shutters that he let out a sigh of relief.

A few hours had passed since then and the situation remained unchanged; he seemed to be the only human around, though he still kept his ears up to listen for others.

The massive riots appeared to have culled the human populace. Most of the civilians lied around in lifeless husks while the few fortunate ones were either in hiding or were far away enough from the city to have survived

the onslaught. The army, on the other hand, had either succumbed to their bloodlust and turned on each other or had gone off on their own in vigilante groups. The number of people alive by then, Yao Yuan deduced, could barely reach a thousandth of this place's normal populace.

Yao Yuan could have easily joined the deserters. His years of war experience as a veteran had greatly tuned his sensitivity to signs of pre-war preparations. He knew something was off about half a month ago when important personnel such as

heads-of-states, military agency directors, special task forces, business moguls, celebrated scientists, and other people of noteworthy accomplishments started to drop off the radar without any seemingly plausible explanation. That was when he knew that the world was going to experience a cataclysmic change; no place on Earth was going to be completely safe, so he decided to simply bunker down where he was.

Nevertheless, foretelling it was dissimilar to understanding it or preventing it. Until now, Yao Yuan could not figure out the

reason behind all of those mysterious disappearances.

That alone was worrying enough, but added on to that were the discomfoting rumors that circulated alongside these disappearances. If those were more than hearsay...

These worrisome thoughts had Yao Yuan's mind up in a twist. As he turned over these speculations, he detected a small rustle of footsteps. Like a wary tiger, he instantly tensed up and prepared to pounce.

As Yao Yuan prepared to face the new danger, a crisp, quail's birdsong drifted from beyond the shutters. Its melody caught Yao Yuan's attention immediately and he started to reply with the same song. Despite being in birdsong, the two seemed to be able to communicate their intentions perfectly. A sense of relief washed over Yao Yuan because that confirmed that it was an ally. He quickly unlatched the shutters, and as the light streamed in from the few open inches, he spotted a figure squatting by a garbage pile a few yards away.

The figure went into action instantaneously. As Yao Yuan lifted the shutters, the person crossed the distance between them in a few lithe movements like a feline on the prowl. The individual leaped into the room with an acrobatic roll and Yao Yuan dropped the shutter immediately after. As the lock clicked into place, one could also hear two great sighs of relief.

"**Lee!** Why is it you that are leading the way? Where are Ol' Wong and the rest of the crew?" Yao Yuan asked with much

urgency while grabbing the fellow.

This guy beside Yao Yuan was an eighteen or nineteen-year-old, but instead of the indifference and brazenness that accompanied his age, he exuded a sense of calmness and stability that came with the sophistication of age. With a warm chuckle, he replied, "Ol' Cap'n', if I do say so, your jabs are always so peculiar. I've been a scout for more than a year now, so it has been decided that I alone shall scout ahead while the gang waits outside the city walls. There are still small

troops of soldiers in the area, and while the team could easily dispatch of them, the sound of gunfire would inadvertently draws nearby forces. That would result in unnecessary complications, so they'll only move at night. If I don't to return by then, they will know that you're safe and will come here together."

Yao Yuan nodded along to Lee's explanation. The contingency where Lee couldn't have made it back to the group because he had died did not even cross his mind. That was the strength of the faith that the members of

the Black Star Unit had in each other. Despite being only a fresh recruit, Lee was a part of this elite group. He was right when he said that they could handle the leaderless soldiers with ease. In fact, every single of them could. Even if Lee were to fail in direct combat, he could lose them effortlessly with his unmatched ability at stealth operations. If Lee did not return on time, the only logical conclusion was that he had found refuge with Yao Yuan and not because he had landed himself in trouble.

At that moment, Yao Yuan

couldn't help but lament the obscurity that had stubbornly shrouded the Black Star Unit. He was certain that the team could evenly match or perhaps be better than other special forces around the world, but because of political reasons, their fame could never rival those of other local units that had "Dragon" in their names. Those names seem to suggest greatness, while ours...

Yao Yuan shook his head to snap out of his reverie. He then suggested, "Lee, please don't refer to me as Captain anymore; I stopped holding that title when

I left the army two years ago. Now that I think about it, I have never even been your superior officer, so please refer to me by my name, or Brother Yao if you prefer."

At that suggestion, the usually calm Lee became uncharacteristically flustered. "How can you suggest such a thing, Captain?! If Captain Wong hears about this, I'll be dead meat! Also, many times when the members were in trouble, it was you who came to our rescue! In any case, you'll forever be our Ol' Captain, Cap'n!"

Hearing this, Yao Yuan could only let out a few dry laughs. He knew that arguing further would be pointless; the members were as stubborn as they were good. It was at this time that he could give Lee a good look. The fella's clothes could barely qualify as rags; there were still spots where the mud hadn't even dried yet. After giving Lee a good-natured slap on the shoulder, Yao Yuan led him inside. "Why don't we go down to the basement first? We'll find you a clean change of clothes and some food to fill your belly. After that, you can rest until the rest of them arrive, then I'll give

a briefing on why I've issued the order for the team to come here."

The prospect of rest appeared to lull Lee's demeanor as he was led into what would be the base of operations. The pair passed through rooms in various stages of destitution before reaching the stairs that led down to the basement. At the end of the steep decline there was a dark, enclosed space; its state of disrepair was not unlike the ones they had just passed. Yao Yuan moved to a corner and lifted up the floor in one mighty pull. A light source from

beneath revealed an opening in the ground. The lifted "flooring" was a giant sheet of steel that acted as the hatch. Yao Yuan deftly squirmed through the gap and Lee quickly followed.

The surprise of finding a vast, bright space hit Lee almost instantly. Before things started falling apart, Yao Yuan had spent quite a bit of resources modifying the 100 square meters space underneath the basement. The place was well stocked with food and water, several boxes of clothes, an array of weaponry, and most impressively, it was well wired, thus making it

capable of supporting light sources, a working computer, and other miscellaneous machinery.

Seeing all of this, Lee displayed an out-of-character burst of youthful excitement. He even went so far as to doing a somersault before digging in voraciously into the ample supply of food and drinks. "Now this is the life! Ol' Cap'n sure is something else! A few months ago during troop field training, the team got into an altercation with the Dragon Prosper Unit at some godforsaken desert. If weren't for overall vigilance, we

would all be beneath the sand by now. Added on to that was the need to trek out of the desert, the need to stay on the move to avoid the army, and also the need to rush here... it was truly a hell on earth. And to think that Ol' Cap'n was enjoying himself all this time," Lee mumbled jokingly between bites.

There was not much Yao Yuan could say in response to that. He figured a shoulder pat would be a better interaction to signal solidarity, and as he did so, Lee collapsed under his touch as if he was hit by a punch instead of

a light pat. The shocked Yao Yuan directly went into application of emergency aid. Luckily, Lee's heart rate and pulse were fine and he also did not seem to have suffered any physical trauma. It appeared that the kid had fallen asleep due to extreme exhaustion. To be able to doze off while chomping down food told Yao Yuan that the last few days must have indeed been awful for Lee. Factoring in Lee's standing as the junior of the Black Star Unit, his journey surely had been more arduous than the rest's. As Yao Yuan's heart was going out to the kid, he also intuitively understood why Lee was given the solo scouting detail; it was a

covert kindness on Ol' Wong's part that Lee would reach him first and could earn some rest before breaking under exertion.

Yao Yuan proceeded to move the lugging form of Lee's sleeping body onto one of the makeshift beds. As Lee snored away peacefully, Yao Yuan's fingers went flying across the keyboard. A set of numbers and a few lines of sentences in English appeared on the monitor screen. He then stared intently at the random sets of writing as if willing them to move into a more comprehensible arrangement. Nevertheless, as

day turned into night, there wasn't a discernable difference.

As night descended, Yao Yuan found himself back at his perch by the shutters. Maybe it was his encounter with the Black Star Unit, but sitting there looking out over the barren wasteland reminded him much of his days as the unit's captain. It was a job that demanded a lot of concentration and composure. On several occasions, he would be able to hear sounds of screams, of crying, and of gunshots from varying distances away.

They were the human civilization's swansong. They represented man's desperation and despair; the animalistic nature from which humankind had spent ages to evolve from. It seemed oddly fitting that this was the form man reverted to before the end, clawing at each other like some feral beasts.

As time slowly moved to midnight, a celestial appeared in the inky sky. Its luster paled even that of the moon, and under its silvery light, a group of men, about ten in number

moved mutedly through the city streets. Their movements made no sounds and awakened no one as they moved toward the ruined shop. They moved through the rooms and later down to the basement as hushed silhouettes of the night.

In the basement's better light, one could see that each of these men had their faces creased with lines, stories of the vicissitudes of life. The eldest of them all was about thirty of age and went by the name of Wong Guang Zhen. He was the leader of the group. Despite his position and seniority in age, he still referred

to Yao Yuan with much admiration and respect.

The rest of them, no matter their age, were also men of substance. This was evidenced through the restraint they showed at meal time. In spite of their gnawing hunger, they only allowed themselves the bare necessities, not one bite more. As they settled quietly in place after the hasty meal, one by one they slowly trained their attention at Yao Yuan. Finally, Guang Zhen asked, "Ol' Cap'n, surely you didn't invite us here just for a meal, right? Plus, I give this humanity business at most

eight more months, so now is not the time to be reticent. Do you need us to clear this city of those armies? Consider it done!"

A few others started howling at what would appear to be the simplicity of the task. The worst offender was an African American man that was built like a tank. His size and physique lent him an appearance that was more akin to a machine than a human being. He rasped, in a deep baritone, "On the way here, we spotted quite a number of those filth. Ol' Cap'n, you say the word and tomorrow I'll gladly give them a taste of their

own medicine!"

With a head-shake and a sigh, Yao Yuan lamented, "Those are indeed some damnable nuisances, but that's what they are, nuisances. The reason I've called you all here isn't to handle those slim pickings and then wait eight months for the arrival of the rapture. There's a bigger problem at hand here and IT IS ... THIS!"

While saying that, Yao Yuan flipped over the monitor to face the group. The whole team,

other than Guang Zhen, who seemed to have caught a familiar glimpse of something, was understandably confounded by the series of numbers and words displayed on the screen.

Without missing a beat, Yao Yuan announced, "This series of numbers represents geographical coordinates, and the paragraphs under it describes a well-known story, a story that is titled..."

"Noah!"

The room, as the front part of the shop house, was is designed in such a way that one side of its wall is completely open to the streets. Therefore, the space utilized a wall of steel shutters that could be dropped down or rolled up according to business hours over doors.

Full name Lee Hai Yun. But since he's the junior of the group, he's often referred to by others as simply Lee.

Chapter 2: Hope!

The evolution of human civilization has always been a fascinating phenomenon; from its humble, primate beginnings, to the miracle of language, the invention of manufacturing, the division of labor, proliferation of fiber optics, and beyond. One would be hard-pressed to find a similar philosophy across these vibrant and wondrous eras. However, there is but one that has remained present through them all, and that is the ideal of progress. After all, the only unchanged thing will always be change itself.

Though progress has never been a constant; it's always in flux, influenced by factors such as famine and war or renaissance and prosperity. That's why periods of enlightenment are always alternated with dark ages. Nevertheless, through the highs and the lows, humanity has dragged itself to this historic day, the 21st century, the era of cosmic exploration...

It was the year 2027 when America finally solved one of the greatest mysteries of the 1950s

and initiated mankind's first step towards space exploration. History stated that in the fifties, an unidentified flying object had crash-landed somewhere in the state of Tennessee. Officials even managed to discover decomposing remains of extra-terrestrial beings on it. Due to the sensitivity of the issue, the crash had been classified as a state secret and kept out of the public eye. American scientists had spent days and nights deliberating over each of its excruciating details, but, probably due to the difference in scientific knowledge, there were no notable breakthroughs for decades... until the second millennium that is.

Since its inception, scientific technology has enjoyed exponential growth. It benefitted from multiple industrial revolutions and theoretical contributions of pioneers from multiple fields and showed no signs of slowing down until the end of the twentieth century where it seemed to have plateaued.

It was, however, in this period of progressive lull that the Americans had unlocked the mystery of the alien spaceship. Perhaps more than a mere

coincidence, it was in that same year that they announced their mastery of space-warping technology. The promise was to warp the first human outside the confines of the solar system by the end of the year 2027. It was easily the biggest news of the century!

Back in the present, Yao Yuan carried on with his explanation, "I've received a mail from a senior of mine around the month of April 2028. It contained an encrypted series of codes. Considering this senior is a key decryption expert, it wasn't much of a surprise. Our

relationship goes way back to when I saved his daughter during an international crisis, and we have been mailing correspondents since then. Around the time I received the mail, I had just returned from a trip to his place. That was when he introduced me to this newly-created decryption key of his. Thinking that was his way of getting me to try his keys, I solved the code without giving it much thought. As you might have guessed, the results of those codes are these sets of numbers and letters."

Facing his companions, Yao

Yuan carried on gravely, "Perhaps it was wrong of me to dismiss it as one of his decoding trails, because not long after that, apocalyptic rumors of every kind started festering around the interwebs. It was then that I intuited these were probably more than a mere trial run. To clear things up, I flew to Italy to visit his family, but when I was there, they were already under heavy surveillance. Based on my observations, I could tell that the surveyors were of American or British intelligence. It was fortunate that I had the foresight to be in disguise then or else it would have been impossible to slip away from the scene without drawing their

attention. Nevertheless, their presence did confirm my suspicion that these letters and numbers are more important than I previously thought they were.

Nevertheless, for the life of me, I was unable to fathom their significance then. My wildest guess was that they referred to some top secret intel that was of note to both the US and the UK, thus explaining the situation I encountered. That was back in the summer of 2029. All of my attention was concentrated on saving this old friend of mine...

Just as the preparations for the rescue operation was going into its final phase, which was more or less a month ago, I'm pretty sure you guys are familiar with what happened then. Important personnel and all the rich and powerful suddenly disappeared overnight. What's more frightening is that none of the country's officials reached out to release any sort of statement; the world simply went on like nothing had ever happened. It was then that I realized that we're in deeper waters than I thought."

Here, Yao Yuan paused. When he carried on, his brows were in knots as if in pain. "As you guys may know, I consider myself quite familiar with European myths, and when I saw the text part of the code, I immediately thought of the tale of Noah's Ark... The story goes that because God saw how sinful the world had become, he decided to punish man by summoning an endless storm. The punishment was meant to literally and figuratively cleanse the world. Only one man managed to survive the ordeal: Noah. Before the storm, Noah received an omen from God; he was to build an ark and corral pairs of animals of opposite sexes onto it.

And because of that, Noah and his family, as well as those animals on board, became the sole survivors of the apocalypse. The survivors were said to have repopulated into what we know as the world today, and the ark that was responsible for saving the world was named Noah, after its builder."

Wong, who was beside Yao Yuan, piped up. "Captain Yao, if we were to connect the story you've just told and these sets of coordinates, you don't think..."

Yao Yuan nodded his confirmation. "That's exactly what I thought! If I'm not mistaken, these coordinates triangulate the location of our Noah, the spaceship that will save the world just like in the story! This might be our only hope of escaping extinction!"

Since a month ago, when the upper echelons of human society started disappearing, the world was thrown into a state of unease. There were small protests and inquiries, but overall civility prevailed. It was a period of contained anarchy as people waited for a new order of

hierarchy to arrange itself.

Things took a turn for the worse, however, when speculations of conspiracies started flying across the masses. As expected of unverifiable sources, there were variations to the story, but the gist was that when the Americans did their first space-warp experiment in 2027, it disrupted the space-time continuum. The result was that astronomers all over the world started to discover an anomaly in space. There appeared to be a rogue asteroid that was hurtling at lightspeed towards the solar system. The asteroid, suspected

to be a fragment of a much bigger neutron star, was low in volume but high in mass, thus making it incredibly dense and therefore dangerous.

Astronomers calculated its density to be multiple times that of earth. They also deduced that based on its trajectory and speed, it would come into contact with the sun around the summer of 2030. The impact would be unimaginably bad. The solar nova would eclipse the whole solar system but not before charring everything to crisps. Without the higher-ups to dictate order, the news plummeted the world into an apocalyptic frenzy. People wailed in despair or went

attacking others in some sort of
widespread lunatic high.
Situations got so bad that the
army staged a military coup,
which unfortunately quickly
spiraled into an indiscriminate
massacre. It seemed like the
apocalyptic gloom had broken
everyone's minds.

It was indeed the end of the
world!

The degree of annihilation
rendered it so that it wasn't
something that could be avoided
by hiding and living

underground for decades, nor could it be deterred by moving to Mars. This was going to be a complete eradication of the solar system! There appeared to be no way out.

The Hail Mary pass would be the culprit that started it all: space-warp technology. One could theoretically use it in a spacecraft to warp over vast distances to beyond the solar system and hopefully locate a hospitable planet in outer space and survive.

Nevertheless, this information would have been privy to the rich and famous as well, and one could surmise that that was the reason behind their mass disappearances. Various covert intel operatives confirmed that these people were, just like the plot of the sci-fi film '2012,' building a spacecraft in secret, behind the prying eyes of the public. It was a literal survival of the fittest! They had colluded among themselves to seek survival on their own and leave the rest of humanity to their own devices.

The lack of scientific knowledge

and leadership was acting against the chance of survival for the roughly seventy billion people that were left behind. Furthermore, for humanity, time was running out. It was already summer of 2029, so the speculated end was less than a year away. Mankind was on its final lap.

The combination of despair and devastation from abandonment twisted humanity back unto its ugly, basic instincts. The world became a cesspool of iniquity, dominated by death, famine, pestilence, and war. The first victims to fall to the Apocalypse

were the unfortunate influentials that were left behind, or the scapegoats. Their families were subjected to unspeakable horrors before being granted the sweet release of death. The next to succumb were the women, who were then followed by the children. With no weaker targets to subjugate, the men finally turned upon themselves.

"But, let's not lose hope!" stressed Yao Yuan, with a punch on the table, denting its metal surface. Between gritted teeth, he declared, "Brothers, have hope! If these codes have a merit

of truth, then we mustn't lose hope! This Ark could be our last hope for survival!"

Chapter 3: Target!

"Now that we have a fixed mission target, it's time to hammer down some other details," said Yao Yuan. As he said it, the gravity of the situation gradually dawned on the Black Star Unit.

"The first will be the location. The coordinates have been confirmed to pinpoint the area where the spacecraft is said to have crashed in Tennessee. This further confirms my suspicion that there's a secret base around there somewhere and that is

exactly where we are heading.

After arrival, the imminent objective is to secure a spacecraft. Next, we will need to learn how to start and pilot it. Those are the fundamentals of our mission. Beyond that... Of course, we will need to secure sufficient rations and drinkable water. The craft will have an air and water purifier, but it will be best if we can round up additional units in case of emergency, because we have to remember that we're going to outer space here. Without air and water, death will be certain. Other than that, we will also

need repair kits, spare parts, and weaponry.

Next will be an important yet tricky matter: human resources. I hate to mimic the ones that left before us, but we have to be realistic here. Based on the size of the craft, we are going to have to decide how many passengers we are taking. This can't be helped; we simply can't rescue everyone... Of course, within our powers, we will help as many people as possible to ensure the continuity of humanity, but we will have to be selective. First priority will be given to scientists or academics,

and after that, it will be technical workers or educators, before finally taking in soldiers or officers like us that haven't turned against humanity in these dire times. Of course, extreme vetting is compulsory to ensure that there won't be any felons among us.

That is a very long to-do list and I'm aware that we might not be able to complete all of these tasks with the time we have left, which leads me to the last issue: time. As you all know, time is already ticking for us. Although experts' estimations state that we have almost eight months

left before things hit the fan, I fear that in reality, it might be less than that. If the asteroid is as dense as the statistics predicted, then we will have to account for its immense gravitational pull. As it charts its way to the sun, that force will be more and more clearly felt. The pull and push dynamism between intergalactic entities could cause unforeseeable damage, especially to delicate technological devices, and that could utterly undo our effort. It could very well spell doom. Therefore, it's best to escape before then, which dramatically shortens our remaining time down to about four to six months," Yao Yuan explained.

"Alright, team! That concludes all of the research and analysis that I've collated over the past month. Hopefully everyone is clear about our situation now. Our immediate course of action is to depart for Tennessee, and hopefully get there in under six days. We'll give ourselves half a month to locate the spacecraft and another one month to learn to operate it. Remember, guys, this is our last hope... No, not our last hope, but the last hope for all of humanity!" Yao Yuan intoned as he worked himself to his finish. "So believe me, brothers, when I say we shall not bring shame to the Black

Star name! FOR GLORY OR FOR DEATH!"

"FOR GLORY OR FOR DEATH!"
echoed the rest of the room.

Yes, indeed... for glory or for death, because against the certainty of victory, even death shall be perceived as glory...

Silence tends to precede the storm, so the night passed without commotion. It has been a long time since the Black Star Unit could lie down to rest

without worrying about their lives, and they knew that this was going to be similarly a rare occurrence in the foreseeable future. Therefore, all of the members of the group laid down their guard and tired bodies, each intent on savoring their first restful sleep in a long time. The next morning, the group woke up refreshed and readied. After a simple meal, they gathered to prepare for Yao Yuan's commands.

"So, just like what we planned yesterday. We need a means of transport that could get us to Tennessee fast. I believe the best

bet will be planes. However, from my assessments, army-commissioned planes will either have been blown up in wars by now or they will be locked behind some army base. The inconvenience of travelling aside, the chances of them being guarded will be high. I do have a lot of faith in our capabilities, but it's never easy to tell who will come out on the other end in a life-or-death situation. Therefore, if it's at all possible, we shall avoid conflict at all costs. Every single one of us has an instrumental role in the overall success of the operation, so please don't lose sight of the bigger picture in the heat of the moment. The cloak-and-dagger

operation yesterday night was a success and therefore we shall adopt the same tactic today. We will move only after the sun sets. The main objective is to locate the spacecraft; the rest we shall decide later."

In a serious tone, Yao Yuan continued on with his orders, "This S city has three commercial airports: one at the edge of downtown, and the other two in the city outskirts. There was a massive bombing at the downtown airport a few days ago; that coupled with the five-day-long riot, the place has been rendered to ruins. Even my

surveillance system got trashed, so the possibility of finding a working plane there is too low for us to risk the journey. Although, the other two airfields might prove to be fruitful, so I would like to us to separate evenly into two parties. One of them will follow me to the city's southern airport, while the other party shall follow Captain Wong to survey the city's northern airport. No matter the result, we shall meet here again at nine tonight!"

Guang Zhen stepped ahead and gave his old captain a salute. "Sir, yes, Sir!"

Yao Yuan nodded his approval but not before issuing Wong another serious order. "Listen to me, Wong; these are all your juniors. Now you promise me that you will bring them out and that you will bring them back here again in one piece, every single one of them!"

"Sir, yes, Sir!" saluted Guang Zhen.

"If there's nothing else, then... dismissed!"

These were all military men, men of actions and not of words. They knew this could be the final goodbye for anyone of them but there weren't any maudlin affairs of farewell, because the focus on the success of the mission was of greater importance. As such, the group left the shop in silence, weaving through the deserted streets, each clutching their arms of choice as they moved towards their respective target locations.

This was the first time Yao Yuan had seen the surface world

since he went into hiding five days ago. He led at the front, scouting ahead for his team. Despite his years being in wars, the sight of the city that night still sent apprehension and sorrow down his heart.

The carnage was
indescribable...

Rivulets of blood streamed freely over the streets, and in the summer heat, they gave out waves of revolting stench that attracted nebulous clouds of flies. Decaying bodies and rotten

body parts littered the ground, acting as warm beds for maggots and worms. It wasn't a cityscape, it was a hellscape!

It painted the perfect picture for the end of humanity. Man has always stood on the tipping scale of logic versus instinct. When neither science nor civility could save humanity anymore, these vestiges of logic would fall. When mankind was shoved into throes of doom and hopelessness, the majority of them simply cracked and regressed back to their carnal state of sin.

Based on his field expertise, Yao Yuan could easily tell that the first to perish were the womenfolk by analyzing the bodies' stages of decay. The bodies were so badly decomposed at this point that he couldn't tell their body types nor ages, much less their facial features. Next were the children and then were the men. Based on the distribution of bodies, as well as the exposed and burnt building frames, it would be a safe bet to say that there were only a handful of survivors. About 80 percent of the city populace had perished, and not a small amount of them were

wearing military fatigue.

Nevertheless, Yao Yuan had remained relatively stoic through it all. The situation demanded that he reverted back to his Special Ops days, for he understood that he was responsible for others' lives now. It required him to be precise, careful, analytical and decisive. The lives of his team and survival of humanity hung onto his balance, so there could be no margin for error.

As his team progressed along,

they saw a few remaining rebel troops. They were either stupidly drunk or dangerously unstable. The smallest of them had about five or six members while the larger ones were as big as twenty or thirty something in number. Not all of them were armed forces though; some of them were corralling civilians, mostly women, like livestock around the city. They noticed that one of the groups was in the middle of a killing spree, while another was indulging their carnal desires, and a few others were locked in a shootout. One even consisted wholly of gang members. How they got their hands on weapons was anyone's guess.

Tempering his human urges, Yao Yuan carefully skirted his team's way around these pockets of chaotic activities. Their path took them through back alleys, deserted buildings, and even a stretch of sewer before reaching their destination at around two in the afternoon. There weren't any signs of life around and the number of dead bodies was also drastically lower around this area. It was good, but Yao Yuan kept on sensing a bad vibe that was lingering in the air.

The town's southern airport's

lobby was locked from the inside. Peering in, it was like a set piece painted fully in shades of black. Yao Yuan looked in through one of the windows and he could see that the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and everything in between were heavily singed. These included a few sets of torched remains that Yao Yuan could discern on the floor.

This scene and its implication were the first thing in the city that truly gave Yao Yuan a frightening chill. After he cleared his surroundings, he summoned the rest of his group to gather by whistling the quail

birdsong. As the full group arrived, Yao Yuan efficiently relayed his commands through a series of hand gestures, signaling his group to form into roles of scouts, backline supports, and long-ranged snipers before moving into the airport lobby.

The place was completely deserted though. There was no sign of human beings other than the grotesque amount of scorched bodies that seemed to endlessly pile upon one another.

There was no other way to describe it other than a mass slaughter perpetrated by an unknown hand. The perpetrator(s) seemed to have locked thousands of people inside the room before lighting it up like a giant bonfire. The place Yao Yuan's team was in was the aftermath of thousands of victims clawing their way out on top of the furniture, the walls, and finally each other before perishing agonizingly in flames.

"BASTARDS!" growled Lee, a sentiment agreed upon but was kept in restraints by the older

members of the group.

Yao Yuan folded into a deep silence. He merely locked his eyes towards the direction of the plane hangar and walked purposefully towards it. After a few moments, the team followed. A few corners and broken door locks later, they finally found themselves before the hangar. No one seemed to have noticed, but Yao Yuan's hands were literally shaking as he pulled open the door.

And what greeted them was...

yet another disappointment!

There wasn't a single usable plane. What was left were a bunch of exploded metal shrapnel or crushed aircraft carcasses.

"... .. Let us return to base and wait for updates from Captain Wong's group," Yao Yuan concluded briskly. He had seen what he needed to see and so, he turned to head back without a lingering glance, leaving behind a number of his stunned teammates.

(That whole operation was a deliberate sabotage. The deconstruction methods of the machinery were too highly efficient. This whole thing reeks of military involvement, but why and whom? Could it be...)

(That there's someone other than myself that knew about the code or the coordinate? Someone or some group that is also currently in THIS city?)

Chapter 4: Emergency Repairs

Later that night, when Guang Zhen's team returned to the shop's basement, the overall atmosphere was one of defeat. Even without communicating it out loud, their facial expressions said it all. Both parties had come back empty-handed; there wasn't even one functional aircraft, much less one that could support ten something people in flight.

"Sorry, sir, but there was nothing of use, not even a single

one. All the planes were destroyed by either explosions or brute force," Guang Zhen reported solemnly.

Staring at his laptop's monitor, other than developing a deeper frown, Yao Yuan did not give any additional response. It was only after a long pause that he picked up the threads of the conversation. "As I've mentioned, we have to get to Tennessee fast. Getting there is a race, so all these setbacks make me suspect that it might not only be us that have access to these coordinates. Sorry, team; that was incredibly careless of

me. I should have been able to tell that even if the decryption expert had sent me the coded coordinates, he might not be the original source. This is, after all, the last chance at survival, so it should come as no surprise that other parties are interested in it as well. But we shall not have this taken away from us... Right, Lee mentioned before that you guys got into a scuffle with the Dragon Prosper squad during field training out in the desert. When was this?"

The unexpected question stunned Guang Zhen. As he pondered over it, a forbidding

guy next to him answered, "That was twenty-seven days ago, sir. We were doing field training together and the relationship was amicable until the twenty-seventh day of training. That was when they suddenly turned on us. Three of us died on the spot, while another two were seriously injured before finally bleeding out. But don't worry, they didn't have it easy either; we returned the favor. About six members of their squad died, downsizing their number to around twenty people."

"That was twenty-seven days ago, huh?" Yao Yuan's face fell,

and then he explained, "Even though the Dragon Prosper squad isn't under direct command from a government agency, they still have someone up there to answer to, so they won't haphazardly initiate an inter-squad altercation without orders from above. Cover-ups have muddled the exact departure date for the rich and powerful, but it was estimated to be around that time as well, so if we were to connect these two facts, chances are that the higher-ups have ordered them to eliminate the Black Star Unit before they leave. However, members of Dragon Prosper are mostly orphans of war, so their loyalty will be to themselves. In

a dire situation like this, one can't guarantee that orders given to them will be followed, so the higher-ups must have dangled some kind of leverage before them to get them to obey..."

Guang Zhen agreed, "So we can safely assume that the leverage was these coordinates? And it was them who were behind the planes' destruction? To jettison us here at S city and thus preventing us from catching up to them at getting the spacecraft?"

"That's the most likely scenario... But whether or not it was to deter us, we can't be sure of that. For one, they don't know that we're in possession of the coordinates as well; for another, they probably can't tell that we're in this city too. The carnage was probably routine for them. Of the four Dragon squads, the Prosper are known for their volatility and cruelty; havoc trails in their steps... So if that's the case, we might still have a chance at this."

Yao Yuan continued, as his head dipped in concentration and planning, "Because if that's true,

then the destruction we saw was for the sake of destruction; it wasn't as premeditated and systematic as I presumed. Following this trail, it looks like they're hightailing their way to Tennessee as well, so they probably didn't have enough time to commit to their usual complete demolition. That's why instead of a uniformed detonation, some planes we saw were crushed, while others were shot. This misgiving could be our lucky break..."

At this point, Yao Yuan lifted his head and issued his order to the group, "So the plan now will

be to search a wider area. Tomorrow we will clear a path through the city to the two airfields. We will hit the southern one first and then the northern one. Along the way and at those locations, we will be salvaging any and all usable parts and frames. If my calculations are correct, we should manage to patch together one or two aircrafts. They needn't be perfect as long as they can carry us to America. If this plan fails, then we will have to risk raiding the nearby military base."

Hope returned to the team as

Yao Yuan laid down his plan, because each of them started to see that it could actually work. They were, after all, members of Special Ops, and disproportionate to their fame, they were the best of the best in this field. Every single one of them had basic training in machinery, and a few were in fact experts in firearms and machine maintenance. Despite having no real experience working with mid-sized crafts like commercial aircrafts, they had experience with emergency repairs of helicopters and jets during field rehearsals. All things considered, this might indeed be their biggest breakthrough yet!

The night passed in silence.

The Black Star Unit started their mission early the next morning with everyone getting into their pre-assigned roles. There were four small groups in total this time around. The first was being led by the forbidding guy, who was in charge of sniper detail, the second was the assault team led by the African American giant, Lee and his partner were recon scouts, and the rest were tasked with clearing the streets and searching for sizeable trucks for

transport. The mission progressed along slowly due to a series of deterrents which included fallen debris and wasted vehicles as well as armed rebels and riotous civilians.

It is worth mentioning that there exists a distinct difference between trained and normal troops. Normal armies, due to their strength in numbers, are better at locational conquests, attrition, and regular wars while the skill set of Special Ops are better suited for small-scale skirmishes, infiltrations, and special operations.

And in cities where nooks and crannies are formed by alleyways, ruins, and skyscrapers, the leverage goes to the Special Ops agents.

Along the way, with their strategic deployment of unit roles, the small unit of less than ten easily steamrolled through troops multiple times their size. The real hindrance to their progress was instead the wreckage that gave the truck that they had gathered intermittent halts. By this pace, they wouldn't be able to reach

one airfield, much less two in one day.

Although faced with this quandary, the group received unexpected reinforcements. Their movements attracted the attention of survivors that had previously gone into hiding. By early noon, their numbers grew to about a hundred. The majority were women with only one-third of the total being men. In an ugly twist, the riot seemed to have worked in their favor. The infirm and sick had perished in the early days of the riots. Those that remained were mostly able-bodied young

people. After some food and rest, they had recovered for the most part.

Given the circumstances, Yao Yuan had to utilize the public. After being given a short rest, he separated the group into task forces of ten and organized them to work in shifts to clear the rubble and salvage valuables. As the crew worked themselves towards the target, they grew in numbers, attracting more survivors along the way. The hundred expanded to a thousand plus. The initial salvation crew increased threefold. The speed of progress was boosted

tremendously.

When they reached the objective, night had fallen. As most of them stepped onto airport grounds, they collapsed on the spot. These weren't trained soldiers, after all; they were your everyday public men, ranging from students to office workers and even included children of officials who had never lifted anything heavier than a spoon, much less rubble. The combination of starvation and fear under anarchy with a long day of hard labor broke their limit. After they fell to the ground in exhaustion, none had

the energy to do anything else anymore.

Yao Yuan's team didn't have the time to cater to the public, so they instantly regrouped and moved toward the hangars. Once inside, they separated again into groups and started scavenging for what they needed. As dawn drew close, the result was satisfactory.

As per Yao Yuan's predictions, other than the giant crafts that were easy targets, most of the other crafts were salvageable.

Some of the planes had ruined casks, but their inner parts were relatively well-preserved while others had it in reverse. The salvaged parts were covered in bullet holes or dents, but overall, it was a fruitful find.

Without a moment's rest, they moved on to the remaining part of the mission. First, Yao Yuan sieved through everything they had procured, looking for the best parts among them. Next, they decided upon a frame that looked sturdy enough to support their weight on the flight to America. Before moving on to its inner components, they replaced

whatever needed replacement and added parts that were missing. Labor carried on through the night before finally having an aircraft that looked airworthy. No one managed to breath until after Guang Zhen safely landed from a dry-run that took him one circle around the airfield.

"Then let's not waste a moment's time and head for AMERICA!" expressed Lee, who had been unusually excited since the other members started loading the aircraft with fuel.

Yao Yuan nodded in agreement, but his eyes had never left the crowd. Interpreting it as a weakness of heart, the sniper leader moved close to advise him, "Ol' Cap'n, I know leaving them behind is callous, but it's like what you said: we must think of the bigger picture. Those cowards from Dragon Prosper have their skins only for themselves; we have to move immediately to intercept them or else all will be lost. Sometimes, for the greater good, hard sacrifices have to be made, Captain."

Nodding, Yao Yuan replied as

he drew in a deep breath, "Ying, I know... Don't worry, sentimentality hasn't clouded my judgment." As he said so, he moved toward the crowd.

By then, the world was getting ready for a new day and most of the civilians had risen from their slumber. Due to the unfamiliarity of the situation, most were afraid to wander, so many simply stayed where they were and waited for further instructions. As Yao Yuan approached, there were whispers of rumblings, but those were quickly replaced by silence as they placed their focus on Yao

Yuan.

Without hesitation, Yao Yuan launched into his speech. "We are strangers to each other here, but I can assure you that my team and I are different from those kill-crazy goons. We have your best interest at heart. However, due to extenuating circumstances, we have to take this plane here and leave immediately, but we shall return in one or two months' time... I can't promise much beyond that. Whether to put your faith in us, that is your prerogative..."

Before Yao Yuan could finish, the crowd erupted into objections. Many requested themselves be taken along while some of the women started weeping openly.

Steeling his heart, Yao Yuan continued over the cacophony, "I know that this is cruel, but within this time, you all will need to fend for yourselves. This location is right next to downtown and there's still plenty of resources to be found within the airport. With systematic planning, it should be no issue for a crowd of this size to eke out a living here for a

month or two... Now, we could carry a few people with us, but they will have to fit a criterion: they have to be good with computers. And I'm not referring to simple troubleshooting but experts in encryption and hacking. If you know these things, please stand up. We will bring you along and provide you with protection. Now, this is a life-or-death matter, so we will not tolerate liars. If caught, my team will arrange a special lesson in honesty and I promise you, it will be long and painful... So, again, please, if there are any individuals who fit the bill, do stand up now."

Initially, when the promise of protection was issued, a few people instantly stood up, but as Yao Yuan went into his thinly veiled warnings, one by one, they slowly slid back down. In the end, there was total stillness but no one standing.

Yao Yuan shook his head regretfully, but as he turned to leave, a middle-aged and slightly rotund man sprang up with one hand in the air and another dragging a youngster of seventeen or eighteen along beside him. The teen's head was

dyed a halo of neon and his ears were pierced with jewelry. The older man growled, "Dear sir! My son knows computers and he's very good at it, one of the best in China! Do you remember the hacking of the Pentagon from a few years ago? My son was the main hacker. Please take him with you. I assure you that he won't disappoint!"

As Yao Yuan heard that, he quickly turned and gave the pair a once-over. He quickly surmised that the man was from an affluent background. Despite his tattered jacket and ratty appearance, he exuded an

unmistakable aura of the truly rich.

The teen next to him was in total shock though. His face was draining of blood as he yelled, "Dad! The computer stuff was for fun, even the hacking was just games. Please, don't make me go with them!" He then started to struggle like a petulant child, and at one point, tears even escaped his eyes.

Things took an unexpected turn though when the older man brought down a wooden stick

that somehow got into his hands on his son and knocked him out cold. As the teen went limp in his hands, he asked of Yao Yuan obsequiously, "Sir, please do believe me. My son is really a wiz with computers. I once saw him launch a hack attack using three computers simultaneously. Trust me, I wouldn't use my son's life as wager now, would I?"

Yao Yuan strode to the man with purpose and singlehandedly took over the teen. He then half-goadingly asked the man, "We won't be taking family members because of limited space. You'll have to

stay here with the rest for another two months. So now, would you still let your son go with us? If not, now would be the best time to back out, for I'm not an unreasonable person."

The older man kindly caressed the back of the teen's head, the spot where the stick came in contact with the body. He whispered, "Sir, I'll be honest with you; I have no clue where you people are going nor how dangerous it will be, but I truly believe that my son has a better chance at surviving with you guys than down here. In any case, the world's ending in less

than eight months. I've long said my peace; my only worry is this son of mine. If he can be assured of protection by following you sirs, then I beg of you, please take him with you. He is really, really good at computers. Just tell him that I'll wait for him here. Even after the two months, I will wait at this spot for his return. Please do tell him that..."

Yao Yuan straightened his face, studied the man intensely, and finally said, "Yes, sir, I'm sure you could do that and you have my promise... If your son is truly capable in technology, we will always have his back, and you

can have my word on that. By the way, how shall I address you?"

Dropping the stick, the man gave a low chortle and said, "I go by Mr. Zhang, and that is my son, Zhang Heng... And don't worry, you have my full permission to work him to the bone. I have spoiled him so much that he has picked up a bunch of bad habits; I even caught him doing drugs once..."

"Ha Ha Ha, don't worry about that. Now that he's part of my

team, I guarantee you those habits will be whipped out of his body in no time." As he said so, Yao Yuan reached over to give Mr. Zhang a pat on his shoulder. And in that brief exchange, a pistol surreptitiously slipped from one man's hand into another's jacket.

The two men parted without any more words, just a slow chortle from Mr. Zhang for the gesture was meaningful enough. As the crowd dispersed to prepare to face the rest of the day, a single father was left alone on the field, quaking with grief and reluctance.

About ten minutes later, under the watchful eyes of a thousand-something crowd, an aircraft lifted into the air and disappeared towards the eastern horizon.

"Let's move! Target: Tennessee, America!"

Chapter 5: Storming the castle!

As dawn broke, a moderate-sized aircraft landed in a nondescript Tennessee airport. From it descended about ten solemn-looking soldiers. Sticking out like a sore thumb amongst them was a conspicuously groomed, uncontrollably fidgeting teen.

The leader of the small company appeared to be a man of twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and he was focusing intently on reading the intricate device in

his hands. After a long while, the man said, "We should be near by now. If we continue moving eastwards, in about two days' time, we should be there. Can someone hand me a map?"

A map was quickly unfolded and set on the floor. The rest congregated around it, spending quite some time charting their path before refolding it and putting it away. Then they stood up and prepared to move out.

"So, according to the map, there's a small town that we

could stop at that's right outside of our destination, but the important thing now is to locate a serviceable car, because if it's possible, I'd like to reach our objective in under two days. Any extra time we save is useful because we have no information on the place; it might be a camp, or it could be a fortress, or anything in between." At that, the leader waved the group out of the airport to go search for cars.

The ragtag bunch of people was indeed the Black Star Unit, and the leader was naturally Yao Yuan. They had just spent one

full day up in the air, or to be more precise, that and a short pit stop in Hawaii. The plane they were on was not strong enough to last the full trip over the Atlantic, so they picked Hawaii to stop for gas and maintenance.

Hawaii, like every other place in the world, was in a state of pandemonium, but luckily, the airport they landed in was far enough away from the general populace that it was still relatively functional. They even managed to procure additional fuel. However, because of that detour, they were a bit behind

schedule in arriving at Tennessee.

Nevertheless, they managed to land successfully on Tennessean soil. As they left the airport, along the driveways were already a bunch of stranded cars ripe for picking. As luck would have it, the airport they came out of was in the middle of downtown. There were even still surviving American families bunkering in neighboring buildings. The Tennesseans, though, knew trouble when they spotted it. Yao Yuan's team was too heavily equipped and too proficient in their movement to

be mistaken as your run-of-the-mill army soldiers. Even armed, the Tennesseans knew that this was a group that wouldn't be taken advantage of and thus opted for flight instead of fight.

And just like that, Yao Yuan's team hitched a ride out of town without much of a fuss. As they went on the freeway, their speed picked up considerably because the roads became much broader and thus the number of vehicles blocking their way become fewer in between. The result was that they came upon the town that bordered their destination earlier than

previously calculated.

It was the quintessence of a pioneer's home-front; a small dwelling for a similarly small population. What was weird about the place though was that there wasn't any sign of human beings, not even those of the dead that they'd come to expect. It was as if the whole town was preserved in time, minus the populace. There was no sign of destruction nor of chaos; it was an incongruously idyllic hamlet compared to the devastation they had witnessed along the way. The effect was... unsettling, to say the least.

Yao Yuan sensed that something was wrong, so he immediately went into action. As he leapt down from his seat, he signaled his commands. The rest quickly fell into action. Yao Yuan led two other agents into the town to scout, Ying and his partner scrambled up to the roof of the car to set up their scopes, while everyone else spread out to secure the perimeter.

There was a pair though that had remained still among the flurry of activities, and that was Zhang Heng and his caretaker,

Guang Zhen. Surveying the peaceful scene around them, Zhang Heng couldn't fathom the need for all these security measures. Finally, he asked Guang Zhen, "What's wrong with everybody? We finally found a town that's intact, so we should immediately drive in and go look for food first, right? Don't you people ever go hungry?"

Without turning his head away from the spot Yao Yuan had disappeared to, Guang Zhen replied, "There's something very odd about this town. There shall be no hasty movements before

Ol' Cap'n Yao returns with his scouting report."

Guang Zhen's answer befuddled Zhang Heng, and so he quizzed, "Odd? What's so odd about this place? It looks so peaceful here. Open cemeteries aren't odd for you people but this place is...? Maybe the people have simply packed up and left. Have you guys thought about that?"

Guang Zhen whipped his head around and stared sternly at Zhang Heng for his folly, his displeasure with the kid's

ridiculous hair further fueling his irritation. The sudden burst of ire had a shrinking effect on Zhang Heng, who stumbled a few steps back before wobbling to the ground. Seeing as the kid almost burst into tears, Guang Zhen reined in his exasperation and condescendingly said, "Everything's not as simple as you think, kid. The fact that the world's ending in eight months is public knowledge now. Facing certain death without assurance from the government who had long ago forsaken everyone, how many percent of the public do you think can maintain their sanity? My guess, and I'm guessing yours too, would be only a small percentage right?

This town has at least a minimum of, let's say, 10000 people... what do you think are the chances that those 10000 people are all a part of that small percentage?

And as you can see before you, there are no blissfully carefree townsfolk mulling about; they've disappeared without a trace it would seem. Why do you think that's so?"

As color returned to his face, Zhang Heng subconsciously echoed, "Why?"

"Wipeout, massacre, migration, or... most possibly, we have a trap before us!"

At that response, all of the color that had previously returned to Zhang Heng slowly seeped away. Wipeout... Massacre... Trap... none of these were terms were part of his everyday vocabulary, much less his everyday life. To have landed in such possibilities as a normal teen, a mere nobody, he... was stunned into speechlessness.

Luckily, reality wasn't as bad as Guang Zhen thought. Not long after, Yao Yuan returned with everyone else. There weren't traps in town nor were there signs of bioterrorism or radiation. There were no literal skeletons hiding in the closet. The fact was that their search didn't even turn up one dead body. However, Yao Yuan did manage to solve the mystery of the curated town. The answer came to him when his exploration came upon a fast-food restaurant. After his investigating it, he knew that the town was considerably safe, so he finally relaxed.

Based on the degree of decomposition of the food in the restaurant, it had been at least two months since the town had had human contact. In other words, the townspeople most likely were evacuated around then. Yao Yuan's deduction was that the evacuation was carried out due to the town's proximity to the secret base. To safeguard the secrecy of the spacecraft and its operations, the townspeople had to be moved.

"Or at least that's my speculation," explained Yao Yuan, between bites of canned food that they had retrieved

from around town. "Of course, this is not to exclude the possibility of a secret wipeout. In any case, it's all in the past, so it doesn't concern us. Let's finish our meal and get to that base immediately. I've had a bad taste in my mouth all day. It feels like the biggest hurdle has yet to come."

And so, the team wrapped up their quick dinner and moved on their expedient way towards the locale pinpointed by the coordinates. After a few more hours on the freeway, they veered into a side lane that was attached to an outpost.

Naturally, it was deserted. As they carried on, they passed through more outposts that were similarly empty. Finally, at around three in the early morning, they arrived at the spot where their map had painted as a mountainous, barren wasteland. Imagine their surprise and consternation when in reality they had driven into a secluded mountain valley.

As the team passed through the final outpost, the scene that greeted them put everyone on edge. The concrete floor before them was pockmarked with explosive shrapnel and bullet

holes, and equally disheartening was the presence of a few dead bodies and what would appear to be spherical parts from some mechanical remains. The bodies were fresh kills; they had fallen only yesterday or the day before that.

"Be on alert! Ying, prepare to snipe; Lee, you're with me; Wong, take the rest and secure the perimeter! **Ebon**, cover us!"

Right after he issued the commands, Yao Yuan slipped out through the car window and

dashed to the nearest cadaver. He felt the inert body before taking a whiff of its blood to help procure a rudimentary reading of the situation. A few seconds later, as his team fell in place, he started to take careful steps toward the spherical object.

As Yao Yuan investigated the strange machinery, Lee and one other scout moved ahead for further exploration. Within 30 seconds, a shrill eagle's call came from the pair, which gave everyone a millisecond-long daze before they trained weapons at the call's direction.

However, the call quickly transformed into a more mellifluous quail's birdsong, and without hesitation, Yao Yuan instantly headed its way.

A few hundred meters' jog later, Yao Yuan spotted a bloody figure grasping for breath up against one of the fortress walls. As he moved closer, he confirmed that the figure was a heavily-built man with bushy brows and large eyes. Despite preliminary bandage work, a copious amount of blood was free-flowing from his chest and stomach. It didn't take long for him to lose consciousness, either

from passing out... or from death.

Upon closer examination, recognition dawned on Yao Yuan. The man was his old nemesis, the leader of the Dragon Prosper squad. Yao Yuan promptly retrieved bottled water from his backpack and poured it down the man's throat. As the man coughed up the liquid, he hazily opened his eyes. Quite some time passed before he could get them to focus on Yao Yuan's face.

"Yao... Yao Yuan? How can you be there? This is Tenne..." asked the man in shock, but before long, that shock turned into a booming howl. "Of course, I should have known that those bastards would have tipped you off on this place as well. Yes, it's true, there's indeed a spacecraft locked behind these walls, the very last one. But alas, it's so close yet so far. This thing here is impenetrable; it's on complete lockdown and the passwords they gave us were all false! They initiated the automated defense protocol. It's a bloody trap and my squad walked right into it!" At this point, the gravitas that had appeared moments before from seeing his nemesis had run

its course, and as his breath slowed, the man lamented, in a dwindling voice, "To think of the unspeakable things that we've done for them... and this is how they repay us... How typical... But fear not... Yao Yuan... I shall reserve some seats for the Black Star Unit down below... I'll see you then..." As he uttered those words, the man bled out.

After paying his final respects to his once formidable opponent, Yao Yuan collected himself. As he stood up, he addressed the gathered group. "Alright, team, it's going to be a

harsh battle ahead. I want everyone to be ready with their weapons and ammo. And prep Zhang Heng with the laptop and hacking equipment. We're going to storm this base... And remember, as the Black Star Unit, we are not given the choice to fail!"

"FOR GLORY!"

"OR FOR DEATH!" rallied the group before charging into the ominously dark entrance of the base with Yao Yuan leading the way. That is... other than Zhang

Heng, who was still unfamiliar with the group's dynamic. He fell behind after stumbling a few paces.

The literal translation is Dark Iron, which technically counts as Ebony, but since that sounds too feminine for a man, I've shortened it to Ebon instead.

Chapter 6: Code Name: NOAH! (1)

Without wanting to admit it to himself, Yao Yuan could see that their prospects weren't good. Yes, the Black Star Unit could go toe-to-toe with each of the four Dragon squadrons, but in terms of funding, technology, and pure numbers, his team was lagging behind by leaps and bounds. Frontline equipment wasn't always available, and even at its very peak, the Black Star Unit could barely amass twenty members. They had political manipulation and favoritism to thank for all that.

So, it was hard to believe that his team could succeed where the Dragon Prosper squad had failed. However, Yao Yuan debated with himself that the Dragon Prosper squad were blind-sided by betrayal, so maybe it was the shock that became their downfall.

In any case, Yao Yuan knew that he had to be on full alert. There couldn't be any misstep, because it was not only his fight now; it was a fight for his team and quite possibly the future of humanity as well!

Led by Yao Yuan and other agents that made up the frontlines and rounded up by the mid and close-ranged assault battalion, the group charged into the foyer in an arranged formation.

The previously shadowy room lit up the instant Yao Yuan's team stepped into it. It would seem like the place was fitted with motion-sensor-activated lights. Bathed in the fluorescent lights were a typical-looking office foyer, stairs leading up the side, and a few corridors leading

off to other areas. What was not common though were the seven to eight corpses. To call the sight inhumane was putting it mildly; the bodies were either squished into blobs of tendons and bones or were chopped into parts and pieces.

The smell of congealed blood grid-locked the frowns on everyone's faces, but for Zhang Heng, it also went further south to his stomach. The butchery knocked the wind right out of him, and as he went sliding down, he heaved all over the floor.

Before he went totally down though, Ebon, who happened to be beside him, gave him a supportive grab. After setting him straight, he said, "Well that was unsanitary, but don't you worry; I have the perfect training method for you. A few days in a pile of carcasses and I promise you that after having meals accompanied by squirming maggots, you won't be puking at this kind of sight anymore."

Hearing that, Zhang Heng felt another shot of vomit coming,

but seeing as Ebon might just put his words into action if he has another episode, he forcibly kept it down. The physical and mental exertion combined left him shaken and spent.

Without looking back, Yao Yuan warned, "Ebon, he's just a civilian. Stop toying with him... Now, let's move on."

Yao Yuan trailed a series of footprints and blood that ended before a gigantic pillar, one of the many that decorated the foyer. He started to rotate

around this smooth, metallic post, giving it a detailed inspection.

After a while, one of the other members joined him. He was a man with Adonian-good looks. His perfect and deceptively young features were only ruined by, or some may argue made more rugged by, an ear that was half-lopped off. He took out a spray can filled with white dust and started spraying it over the pillar's surface.

As the dust settled, smudges of

fingerprints started to float out before everyone's naked eyes. The man exchanged a look with Yao Yuan and then both started to move, noting the distribution and locations of these prints. Very quickly, Yao Yuan managed to pinpoint a spot where most of the prints overlapped. As he pushed his finger onto that spot, a chime of silvery tingles sounded throughout the hall. A few moments later, the pillar miraculously opened upon itself, revealing an elevator carriage.

Yao Yuan turned to cast his glance over the group and then said, "Four of you will follow me

down. If this elevator doesn't return in five minutes or is empty when it returns, that means...", Yao Yuan stopped there because the prospect was too harsh for him to elucidate.

He had soldiered on all this while with hope burning in his heart. It would not be wrong to say that this hope empowered him. He couldn't bring himself to openly admit that this hope was not actually within grasp.

And thus, Yao Yuan said no more; he merely stepped into

the elevator. Four more moved to follow him. Among them were Ebon and Zhang Heng, whom he was still supporting.

However, they were stopped by Yao Yuan, "Zhang Heng can stay up here. Ebon, you also stay to look after him. Two other people can follow."

Ebon, stunned by the order, debated, "But Ol' Cap'n, isn't this why we brought him along? There might be something down there that requires his skills..."

Before Ebon could continue, Yao Yuan cut him off. "This isn't a negotiation, Ebon! That's an order!"

Ebon immediately stood at attention and responded with, "Sir, yes, sir!" And with that, he led Zhang Heng out of the elevator.

There was only one button in the elevator and that's what Yao Yuan pressed after the exchange had taken place. The door instantly closed and the seams sealed upon themselves,

reverting the pillar back to an inconspicuous architectural decoration. As the elevator went deeper down, with the exception of Yao Yuan, nerves started to jangle.

This was because Yao Yuan had full faith that the elevator ride posed no threat. He started taking inventory the moment they entered this place, and the number of dead bodies they'd seen thus far didn't tally up to account for all of the members of the Dragon Prosper squad. He expected more bodies. The fact that there were none in the elevator meant that it was safe.

Of course, this also meant that the real danger was further in. These facts allowed him to attempt a reconstruction of the events that had occurred. First, for some reason, the first wave of the Dragon Prosper squad was killed. What reason though, Yao Yuan couldn't tell; they still hadn't come across the Dragon Prosper members that were first to die to draw an inference. Chances were that it was related to those spherical objects that were probably tied to the base's defense mechanism. Anyway, in the ensuing chaos, the rest of the Dragon Prosper squad probably tried to escape through this elevator. Security channels likely crisscrossed the building

and that's why these killing machines could prepare for the escapees before they reached the foyer. The way the bodies were scattered suggested that they were so panicked by either the speed or the numbers of the attackers that they couldn't mount a united defending front. In any case, it was probably a lost cause. The trajectories of the bullet wounds on those bodies indicated that the shots were fired from all around.

To distract himself from those nightmarish prospects, Yao Yuan started massaging his cramping head and silently

counting the meters the elevator had hurtled them past. One hundred meters, two hundred meters, three hundred meters... It wasn't until they were at the eight hundred meter mark that the door whisked opened. What greeted him were bodies that had been peppered into beehives.

As he turned away from that sorry sight, Yao Yuan noted that the elevator had opened unto a straight corridor. On one of its ends was the elevator and on the other a tunnel that veered off into darkness. He could, however, still tell that the tunnel

was man-made from its concrete flooring. It seemed to be a road that allowed vehicles to directly access this area straight from the surface.

With their weapons at the ready, the five-man party started a small search. After making sure nothing posed immediate danger, Yao Yuan ordered one of the men, "Better go get them down here; it's been almost five minutes. Who knows what kind of things they'll do if they don't hear back from us. Be quick."

The person went back up the elevator after giving Yao Yuan a salute. Even though he was just waiting, Yao Yuan didn't dare to aimlessly wander. Instead, he had his full attention trained at a metal door that sat at the end of the long corridor.

This door was disproportionately huge, almost fifty meters in height and a hundred meters in width. It would dwarf even the biggest of men. Yao Yuan couldn't spot any keyholes or door knobs, so he was certain that it was a password-protected door. Even without information on its

actual thickness and material, Yao Yuan's assessment was that it was built to withstand high pressure; homing missiles might even have trouble getting it to crack. This level of security probably meant that it was guarding something highly valuable, most likely what they came for, thought Yao Yuan. However, without even a C-grade explosive on them, it was an impossible impasse.

As Yao Yuan pondered over their dwindling options, his gaze landed on a small protrusion that was nestled in the lower corner of the door. It was a

control panel, which should be connected to the door's password system. If they could hack into it and retrieve its password, they would gain entry. However, systems like these would have a firewall that would trigger the defense apparatus when hacked, so if they took too long or failed... a fate similar to the one the Dragon Prosper squad suffered awaited them as well.

After the whole team had gathered, Yao Yuan briefed them on his observations and analysis. As he finished, his eyes landed squarely on Zhang Heng.

At this point, Zhang Heng was completely terror-stricken. He repeatedly shook his head, saying, "No, you people don't understand; I'm just a small-time hacker who deals with simple data decryption." It was a statement which made the faces of the people around him darken. Noting this, he quickly launched into a series of explanations. "Yes, yes, my dad did say I am good at computers, but all of that came from gaming. Yes, I could manage hacking basics like bait and switch or DDoS attacks, but you could barely count me as the best in China, much less in the

hacking world, where I have no standing what so ever..."

Yao Yuan strode before Zhang Heng and stared him down, cutting his monologue short. "Then tell me what rank are you in China. And don't you lie!"

Zhang Heng tore his head away and stammered, "Th... third..."

It didn't showcase on his face, but Zhang Heng's unexpected proficiency at hacking gave Yao Yuan a small surge of hope.

Without letting his austere façade fall, Yao Yuan enunciated his order. "Then you're our best chance at this! Look, I'm not going to lie; there's probably going to be something that will attack us once the hacking starts, but you'll be safe. There are no bodies or blood anywhere near the control panel, so obviously the firepower won't be focused there first. Most likely, they will come from these two walls of this corridor here, but we'll be between them and you, so unless every single one of us dies, no harm will befall you! I only need you to hack the password to open this door. That's my only request."

Zhang Heng stared blankly at the panel. Just as he was going to say something more, Yao Yuan hunkered down for a man-to-man talk. "Listen, kid. I'm not going to threaten you or do anything like that, because honestly, our fate is in your hands now. So just hear me out... Unlike the rest of us here, you still have something concrete to fight for. That day, to ensure your survival, your dad made a big target of himself. He's the reason you're safe now, unlike the rest of city S. I know he's not the one directly responsible, but resentment can be a very manipulative emotion.

Do you understand what I'm saying? If you complete this mission, we'll be able to get in there... and I'll be frank, there's a spacecraft in there that could carry us, your dad included, off to safety, safety from the apocalypse. Now, he has done everything he could to keep you safe, so tell me, don't you want to do the same for him?"

Between tears, Zhang Heng nodded his willingness to try, but before he could start, he asked, "Do you have any... medicine stuff? Could you give me just one pill? It'll help me focus better."

Yao Yuan was slightly stunned by this unexpected request, but without expressing disdain, he signaled the man with the missing ear lobe, who retrieved from his bag a shot of morphine. As he moved towards Zhang Heng, he informed him, "The dose I'm giving you is just enough to supercharge your senses but not enough to induce hallucinations. Also, the high is temporary, so move fast, okay?"

Zhang Heng obediently withdrew his arm. The man proceeded to inject him with

half a syringe of morphine.

Then Yao Yuan brought everybody before the panel. The group started to get into their positions, double-checking their weapons and assigning one another's firing range and area. Bodies that were lying about were piled up before the group to be used as a temporary barricade

After their preparations were finished, Yao Yuan nodded at Zhang Heng, who was setting up a signal interjector onto the

control panel. As he saw the signal from Yao Yuan, he took a deep breath before hitting the necessary laptop key, bringing the monitor to life. Echoes of the surprisingly crisp keyboard sounds reverberated through the long corridor before being replaced by a piercing alarm. In the same instant, torrents of spheres started rolling out from all four sides of the walls.

"ATTACK! GLORY TO THE
BLACK STAR UNIT!"

"FOR GLORY OR FOR DEA..."

and the remainder of the rally
was drowned out by the din of
the ensuing bulletstorm.

Chapter 7: Code Name: NOAH! (2)

About two hundred small spheres rolled out from the four surfaces of their surroundings, each the size of a small fist. On each of their very tip blinked what would appear to be a pair of electronic eyes. Thin metallic wings adorned those eyes, giving the spheres the function of flight. Each of them emitted a continuous refrain of "Hello", not unlike the recorded greetings from service calls.

Under the circumstances

though, the sing-songy chorus of Hello's had everyone's blood frozen!

Luckily, these small ball-like drones moved surprisingly slow and were unexpectedly fragile. Before they could even launch an offensive, more than half of them had already perished under a hail of the bullet storm. What was unlucky though was that every single one of them packed a devastating punch.

Under those eyes, were a needle-sized hole, and sparks

flew all over the place as shots were discharged from within at lightning speed. Three persons at the foremost were hit with a series of bullets but they were undeterred for fact was the shots hurt nothing more than a pin-prick. Not a moment later though, what was seconds ago three full-bodied men burst and rained down in a slew of flesh and blood. With the exception of one, one could barely identify the other two sets of remains as pieces of human body parts.

"Damn! These are electro-magnetized bullets!"

Watching three of his comrades fall, Yao Yuan felt an acute pain slice through his heart but there wasn't time for grief. Without a moment's notice, he let loose a hand grenade and shouted, "Seek cover people! Be careful! These are electro-magnetized bullets, one hit and you're gone!"

Heeding his advice, the rest of his squad quickly flattened themselves onto the ground, minimizing their rate of exposure. Then, anything and everything nearby, be it body parts or machine parts, were

gathered before each to be used as a shield.

Electro-magnetized bullets were by then a recently minted type of ammunition. It was similar in design to the earlier [Dum-Dum Bullets](#) but was much more powerful, especially in terms of lethality. Created as a byproduct in a new [Gauss Rifle](#) research, these bullets could be fired at an incredibly fast speed, and because of that had good penetration. Once it came into contact with a hard target, which normally would be the bones in the human body, the electromagnetic casing would

convert the interrupted kinetic energy into a pressurized magnetic push, which as one would expect, if happened within the body is extremely fatal.

Being hit by those bullets was like being injected with an orb of highly pressurized air. The impact point would expand and eventually burst, as the air within sought release. Its power was not unlike that of an [anti-material rifle](#), they are so powerful that victims of these guns usually won't be left with a full corpse.

However, these bullets have a fatal flaw: their power is concentrated on their initial target. In other words, one would be safe if one is not hit by it directly.

And that was how the rest of Yao Yuan's team survived the onslaught. While the human shields were repeatedly minced, the rest was relatively safe behind cover. The grenade that Yao Yuan lobbed off managed to give Ebon and his assault coordinate the opening necessary to clear up the rest of

the drones. When they finally had the chance to take a breather, the floor was littered with shattered pieces of drone parts and thousands of empty artillery casings. As the chorus of robotic Hello's fell silent, it was replaced by Lee's sorrowful wailings. Still not completely inured to life on the battlefield due to his lack of experience, Lee broke down before the three died members' sorry remains. Echoing across the corridor was his cries and their names.

The trio were all part of the scout's unit, they were Lee's close partners. Their sudden

deaths were too unbearable for his young heart.

Yao Yuan squatted down beside Lee with a sigh. As he retrieved three dog-tags from the remains, he uttered, "Dear comrades, it has been a tiring journey, you all deserve this rest... Don't you worry, we shall finish the rest on your behalf." When he stood up and walked off, there was neither sorrow nor pain. None managed to notice though that under his bloody hands, the knuckles that gripped those tags had gone completely white from grabbing them too hard.

As the rest moved to console Lee, the alarm suddenly sounded. Everyone immediately went into action. As the walls before them folded upon themselves, about ten mechanical spiders each half an inch in diameter came skittering out.

"Fire! And don't save those grenades..." Yao Yuan yelled in between shots, "Zhang Heng, what's the matter? Did the hacking fail?"

Without taking his eyes off the monitor, despite his body shaking all over, Zhang Heng answered in a voice that's clearest it has ever been, "Nothing's the matter! I've cracked the password's first layer of defense, the base is responding to this breach!"

"Christ! How many layers are there?" Yao Yuan growled as he let loose another grenade.

"I've passed the first one! Counting the current one, there's still two more..." Zhang

Heng replied as his fingers flew over the keyboard.

Yao Yuan released yet another grenade, this time in tandem with an angry "Fuck!". A few other members followed his lead but before those explosives could hit their target, they were detonated in mid-air following a sudden blinding flash of light. Nearest to the waves of explosions was Lee, followed by Yao Yuan who was flung a few meters back through the air. As he was tossed back upon the ground, there was incessant drumming in his ears, and his body felt like it had just been

shattered into pieces.

(This... This is... laser...)

Yao Yuan tried to pick himself up but his body was for some reason out of his control. The explosive wave had actually concussed his brain, depriving him of basic motor skills. His anxiety was palpable but despite his best intentions to speak, all sounds were caught in his throat.

At this moment, while fire

blazed around him, Yao Yuan felt himself being dropped into a pool of serenity as the world gradually went silent. It was a faintly familiar sensation, reminding him of a training experience he once had in a space station somewhere...

"Wong, we're dealing with lasers here. Based on the size of those spiders, their storage of energy can't be unlimited. Keep throwing those grenades, it doesn't matter they don't detonate on target, the aim is to exhaust the power source inside those spiders..."

Guang Zhen heard this order just as he was going to release another round of bullets. He could recognize it as Yao Yuan's, instantly, he switched out for grenades and ordered, "Keep throwing those grenades! Everyone stop firing! Use explosives!"

The order made them pause, for it had just been shown, grenades would only get blown up in mid-air; it was of no use. However, over the years, they've learnt to not question the orders of their leader, and so

subconsciously, everyone reached for their grenades and let them fly. Most of them were indeed discharged during their initial arc through the air. Following the blast, two other members who were at the foremost, crumbled to their knees and died.

At this point, it would seem like the team was just wasting their stores of grenades. Nevertheless, Guang Zhen didn't let up, he ordered the team to keep on going. As they were going to run out of bombs, one finally dropped amidst the drones and went off with a resounding

boom. As the smoke and ember cleared, what was left were the fractured remnants of all the mechanical spiders.

After two life-threatening battles, those that remained could barely hold themselves upright. As they slumped to the ground, they solemnly regarded their captain with utmost respect to which Guang Zhen rejected by replying, "Ol' Cap'n, your reaction and analysis are still so impressive. Thankfully, we have you on our side. Otherwise, we would have been exterminated by that group of spidery drones by now."

At this moment, Yao Yuan shakily stood. His balance was still seriously unhinged, in his eyes, the room seemed to be swerving on its own. He responded with a dry chuckle. The fact was, he still hadn't rediscovered his ability to speak.

Another three deaths were mourned in silence. These were all comrades that had been through hell and back together, their loss was deeply felt.

Struggling with his body, Yao

Yuan collected two more tags. As he moved towards the middle of the carnage, he suddenly bellowed, "Xiao Bai! I need your over here quick!"

The guy with the loped off ear was caught off guard by the sudden order but that was quickly transformed into joy. He rushed ahead with his medical bag, and managed to ascertain that even though Lee was covered in shrapnel and lying in a pool of blood, he still had a breath left. Blood loss was severe, and many of his organs were traumatized by multiple blast force but he was indeed

still breathing. Xiao Bai quickly gave him a shot of painkillers and rattled off a series of orders, "Quick! Get two men here! Carry him off to the back for me! He needs a blood transfusion stat! Clear some space!"

It wasn't a task that requires two persons after all, since right after Xiao Bai yelled his directions, Ebon charged ahead and swept Lee in his arms. Within a few large steps, he reached Zhang Heng's side and glancing at the hacker, he laid Lee carefully down on the ground. Xiao Bai followed closely behind and immediately

conducted an emergency rescue operation.

Out of the blue, a third alarm sounded off. The floor of the corridor opened up before everyone's eyes, revealing seven or eight strange looking robots. Their upper body was humanoid with the exception of the arms which were fitted with machine guns while their lower half were swapped out for tank tracks. Weirdest was their torso which was a honeycomb shaped contraption. Yao Yuan's team guessed these were probably openings for missiles.

Each of these automatons was two meters in height and they looked sturdy enough to withstand normal gunfire.

The sight of them filled Yao Yuan's team with despair. Out of nowhere, a shot was heard, hitting one of the automaton right in its torso. A second later, it exploded in a fiery combustion; the radiating heat waves could be felt by everyone even though they stood hundreds of miles away.

Ying roared, "Have the rest of the sharpshooters gone dumb? Those hexagonal holes on their chests are natural targets! So pick one! Come on people! Let's score some holes in one!"

Just like that, two more marksmen set down their scope and started firing. Not within ten seconds, even before any of the drones could return fire, all of them had fallen in piles of scraps. The base's third wave of defense was surprisingly weak.

Or that was what they hoped...

Because right then, the floor opened again. And another troop appeared to replace the one before it. Even with everyone else joining in, the cycle seemed to infinitely repeat itself until the three marksmen started to show unusual signs of panic.

"How it's going over there, Zhang Heng? We can't hold them off any longer!" Yao Yuan asked for an update, as he rushed to Zhang Heng's side.

Panic was similarly written all

over Zhang Heng's face. Based on the sound of tank tracks and gunshots that were slowly closing in, without prying his eyes from the screen, he knew time was ticking. "This is a new kind of encryption that I've not encountered before. It's something that's brand new, something that's controlled by AI, instead of your lock-and-key hacking technique, it's like you're trying to win a game of chess against the computer with him learning to adopt and adapt to your every move... Argh! I don't know how to explain to you! The long and short is that he's asking for some kind of code but I have not seen this code referenced anywhere before!"

From behind them came Ying's request of help, "Damn it! I'm out of ammo! Assistance! Xiao Bai, move it and toss me some ammo!"

Without the head sniper's cover, the team started to lose their ground as more and more drones glided towards them through the explosion and smog. Before long, the drones lifted their machine-gun arms and had their target locked on. As they were prepared to fire...

"NOAH! IT's NOAH!"

Without thinking about it, Yao Yuan yelled that at Zhang Heng. For some reasons unknown even to himself, he felt compelled to let that be known.

That gave Zhang Heng a pause, who turned to ask, "What Noah?"

"N-O-A-H! NOAH! THE CODE NAME IS NOAH!" Yao Yuan screamed at the top of his lungs.

Without much choice left, Zhang Heng keyed in the code. And just like that, the earsplitting sirens went mute and the drones which were in the cusp of firing froze on the spot, all semblance of power draining away.

On the other side, behind Yao Yuan's team, the cogs inside that giant metallic door started to turn. As the mechanism ticked into place, an opening slowly unveiled itself. It was after seven barriers had lifted themselves that a full path would appear.

Yao Yuan's team ushered themselves through the door that was itself almost ten meters long before appearing on the other side where...

A conical shaped spacecraft the size of a small hill awaited them!

Also known as the expanding bullet. Invented by the British forces in the nineteenth century, it's a type of hollow shell which expands and explodes upon contact. The name Dum-dum comes from its main ordnance factory located at Dum Dum, India.

Also known as a coilgun. A type of projectile accelerator that is used to fire high-velocity bullets. The name Gauss refers to Carl Gauss who wrote the mathematical formula for magnetic effect in magnetic accelerators.

A high military grade weapon. Main purpose is for disabling siege machines. Design is inspired by World War 1 Anti-tank rifle.

Name for the man with the loped off ear. Literal translation

of the Chinese name given to him is Little (小) White. The term (小) or xiao is often used together with a name as an endearing nickname for someone younger than the speaker.

Chapter 8: Hope!

Hope, as per its definition, is putting an oftentimes untenable target before oneself to be used as a drive to carry on. Therefore, it is always a surreal experience when hope gets realized. And it is this uncanny feeling of being in a dream that pervaded Yao Yuan's group when they passed through the door. They found themselves on a platform elevated about two hundred feet off the ground with simple staircases leading off its end. Then, a vast area about ten football fields in size opened up before their eyes. Like an underground kingdom, the place

was so big that it stretched beyond the horizon.

Set in the middle of this field was a mountainous spacecraft. Even from their vantage point, it looked humongous. A visual estimation would put it at about 10000 meters in length and more than 200 meters in height. Dwarfing even aircraft carriers, the spacecraft was the size of a small city.

However, with something of this size, some questions were bound to circulate. How was it

made? With modern human technology, it would be pretty unfeasible to even design, much less build, such a thing. Another would be: how would it fly? How much power was needed to lift something this size into the air? And furthermore, how could it possibly gain enough momentum to break through Earth's ozone layer? So many unanswered questions!

Yao Yuan's team was heavily troubled by these prospects. Even without deep scientific and astronomical knowledge, these were simple issues that needed handling if they were to leave

earth with this spaceship. Was there an energy source or technology advanced enough that could solve all these issues? They were doubtful. Man might need a few more centuries of research before they could find the solutions.

In any case, this was their best bet. After taking about ten seconds to catch their breath and perhaps also to ensure that everything around them was not an illusion, Yao Yuan ordered his troops to move out. "Ebon, remember to bring Lee along. Xiao Bai, how's his injury?"

As Ebon moved to pick up the still unconscious Lee, Xiao Bai replied, "He's still quite unstable. A few pieces of shrapnel are lodged too deep into his body. Without proper equipment, I'm afraid it's too high of a risk to extract them. Another issue is blood loss. We're running out of available reserves; the stockpile I've collected along the way won't hold out much longer. Without proper treatment and medication soon, things aren't looking well."

"How many days could he hold

out without proper treatment? Give me an estimate," requested Yao Yuan, as his sight fell on Lee.

After giving it some thought, Xiao Bai answered, "If I'm to put him on continuous physiological saline support, I'd give him five more days if there's no infection or accident."

"So... it's best to have it done within three days..." Yao Yuan frowned. "Alright, I promise you I'll find you a usable surgery bay within three days. You keep him alive until then!"

Yao Yuan then moved to descend down the stairs. The rest of the Black Star Unit picked up their slack and followed silently. Only Zhang Heng remained standing rooted to the floor. He was shaken and stunned. It was as if he hadn't come down from the adrenaline yet. Passing him, Ebon gave him a healthy smack on his shoulder. "Let's move, kid! That worked out better than expected, huh... so, listen. Thanks."

The force of Ebon's smack sent Zhang Heng sprawling. He

quickly recollected himself and fell behind Ebon's footsteps, asking, "There's no need to thank me; it was for my own benefit as well... But is it okay leaving your comrades' bodies behind like that?"

Ebon shook his head and took a considerable pause before answering, "You have to understand that this is a war... Kill or be killed. At the end of the day, we don't mind whether it's cremation, or burial, or neither. What's important is to die fighting. And that's the greatest send-off there is."

Zhang Heng gave a grunt of pseudo-understanding before continuing his trail behind Ebon.

Because Yao Yuan was leading the way, he was the first to step onto the solid ground. Loosening his joints, he doubled-over until his palms touched the floor before straightening up and raising his head towards the sky, which was technically the ceiling of the spacious underground cavern they were in. It was a few moments later that he started to

move towards one of the nearby jeeps.

Other than the spaceship that dominated most of the cave, there was also a row of cars just beneath the platform. Around them were blocks of buildings that appeared to be residences. These white-washed buildings lacked any sort of personality, and based on their arrangement and parallelism to each other, Yao Yuan surmised that these were probably barracks, which meant that at some point, this place had an army of considerable size.

However, by then, other than the fifteen that still remained in Yao Yuan's group, there was no one else about.

As others went into their choice of vehicles, Guang Zhen leapt into the passenger seat of Yao Yuan's jeep. As he patted his hands down the dashboard, he asked, "So Cap'n, how's the situation?"

Yao Yuan spread out his palm. It was covered with a thick layer of dust, a result of its previous

contact with the floor.

Looking at his palm, Yao Yuan explained, "I believe it has been at least a month since people have set foot in here. Despite that, the electricity of this place is still on, so this place is probably some kind of a perennial bunker, probably supported by nuclear energy. Other than that," and here he looked up, "that spacecraft probably uses anti-gravitational force as its main energy source."

Following Yao Yuan's line of

sight, Guang Zhen repeated what his captain had just said to ensure that he hadn't heard wrongly. "Anti-gravitational force? The kind they write about in science-fiction?"

Yao Yuan nodded his confirmation. "Vertical elevation; it's the only logical explanation. Look around you. There is no exit that is big enough for that spacecraft except up there." He circled a general area above the spacecraft with his finger. "These cave walls look to be naturally formed, other than that area directly above the

spacecraft. There is some kind of metallic construction there, and if I'm not mistaken, that can be used to pull open the ceiling. However, without a landing strip to gather momentum, it would require an immense force to lift this spacecraft into the air. I doubt you could manage that even with all the fuel in the world.

Which leaves one last possibility: anti-gravity," Yao Yuan concluded.

Guang Zhen could see that

indeed at that one part of the cave ceiling, there was a lattice of metal contraption. It would seem like his captain's hypothesis was very likely to be true.

That was where the pair's conversation ended, because at this point, everyone else had gotten ready in their rides. The group of motorists sped towards the spacecraft. After all, that was their main objective in coming here.

The ten kilometer journey

passed without a hitch. As they neared the airship and got to a distance where its carapace was within hand's reach, they managed to truly appreciate its enormous size. Driving under its underbelly felt like a long journey in and of itself, that was how big the thing was.

Now that they were at its door, they were stumped. They had no existing information on what was inside, and more importantly, whether or not it was safe. After the hell that they went through, they could not afford to be too careful. They didn't have the resources left to

face another wave of those drones.

Under these circumstances, it was Yao Yuan who acted surprisingly cavalier. Striding up to the cabin door, he sauntered into it as the door slid open. The rest exchanged a few glances, but since they heard no warning coming from within, they soon followed.

The sole exception was Zhang Heng, who shouted, from right outside the door, "Guys! Aren't you afraid there are more killer

robots in there? We just met a few, remember? Guys... Wait for me!"

The spacecraft's interior was perhaps even larger than it seemed when looking at it from the outside. There were rooms in multiple sizes that served different purposes. These included bedchambers, gymnasiums, media rooms, and even a surgery bay attached to an infirmary, which managed to elicit a cheer from Xiao Bai.

It was a well-equipped

spacecraft with enough space to hold tens of thousands of people!

As the team continued to explore, the mood noticeably shifted to one of gaiety, to a point where there was even genuine laughter of joy. For Yao Yuan though, it was the opposite. Because he was so far ahead of the rest, lost in their jubilation, his team hadn't managed to notice that he was getting increasingly somber.

(This is all too good. So good

that there must something devastatingly wrong with it. It has enough storage, space, and amenities. There are even fully-functioning technologies and devices. This spaceship could well support life in space for decades ... But did its creator ditch it even though it's so perfect? There must be something awfully wrong here...)

The more he thought about it, the more worried Yao Yuan got. Along the way, he noticed that most of the pathways were laid with railway tracks whose purpose was probably for ease of

transportation, which was all well and good, but his bigger worry was why hadn't they come across a cockpit or a main control room?

Zhang Heng could barely catch his breath after the exploration party had gone on for about two hours. As he was about to suggest taking a rest, Yao Yuan grabbed hold of him and pulled him before a panel that looked like a data terminal platform. Yao Yuan said, "Zhang Heng, I want to you to hack into this ship's internal system. Don't disturb anything; just find me a map of this ship. We need to get

to the main control room immediately."

Zhang Heng swallowed his words of protest when he saw Yao Yuan's bleak and earnest expression. It was clear that something was worrying Yao Yuan. Feelings of the premonition he vicariously felt launched him immediately into his hacking job.

Because the spacecraft used a similar encryption as the base, within a few minutes, Zhang Heng managed to gain access to

the ship's internal system. Fortunately, he did so without sounding off any alarms this time. However, Zhang Heng's laptop screen was suddenly overloaded with a series of rogue codes. As he moved to counter it, the screen shifted to play a pre-recorded video. Standing in the middle of the camera was an old Caucasian man.

Spotting this man, Yao Yuan took a sharp intake of breath. This old man was the one who started it all. He was the encryption expert whose daughter Yao Yuan had saved, the one who had sent him the

code which had led them to where they were.

"Only people who have received my key have access to this video, and I've only sent it to one person, so hello, Yao Yuan, how have you been?" said the old man, while chuckling. "This spaceship here, consider it my parting gift; a token of appreciation for saving my daughter's life. I hope you'll find it to your taste." The tone turned serious here. "But from here onwards, pay attention and listen up, Yao Yuan. What I'm going to say next will be a matter of life-or-death for you and I'm

assuming your team too, and quite possibly the lives of tens of thousands of people. It's something related to this ship, Noah Two...

Chapter 9: Decision!

"The US discovered a fallen spacecraft around the 1950s, but that is not entirely true. Yes, there was a discovery of a spacecraft, but it wasn't an astronomical find; it was an archeological one. Carbon dating put the actual year of the crash to be more than eight thousand years ago. This spacecraft was merely unearthed in the fifties.

The carapace of this craft was made of a special kind of alloy that was unknown to man until

now. Even though we've built spacecrafts ourselves, the actual component that makes up the shell of that spacecraft has yet to be analyzed. This proves how incredibly backwards our technology actually is.

Along the same vein was the difficulty the government encountered just prying its way in. I'm saying so because it took the government two decades to gain access into the ship. They were only able to gain access through a sustained virus attack on its internal system. That is why there has been an intermittent influx of new

viruses over the years on the electronic web. The government required a continuous stream of powerful viruses to crack this door, so in between months, they released these rogue viruses into public domain with the hopes that programming experts would pick up on them, counter them, and in the process, evolve them. The government then would collect these improved strings of viruses and siphon them into opening this spacecraft. The US government was actually farming the work out to the public without the public actually realizing it." Here the old man laughed awkwardly. "I suppose by now you could guess where I come in, Yao

Yuan. As a renowned encryption expert, I was approached by the government in this project's infancy. I was in a team that was rounded up to uncover the electronic information stored within this spacecraft's computer mainframe. This was around the start of the new millennium, and the team consisted of other encryption experts like myself, programming experts, as well as expert linguists from all over the world. Even with our best men and women as well as a few supercomputers, the deciphering operation took us about a decade to complete.

Information that was dug up, especially intelligence on advanced technology, was shared among all the participating countries. After all, this was only a public secret; among the countries' higher ranked officials, it was pretty much a non-confidentiality. As I've said, this involves countries from all over the world; countries like England, France, Germany, Russia, China, and Japan.

Each of these countries got their fair share of information. Of course, since this was an international affair, a lot of

diplomatic maneuvers were involved. A lot of behind-the-scenes deals were made between the US and these countries because it was, after all, the Americans that made the discovery. For example, your country, China, struck a deal to liquidate a fair portion of US's national debt. Instead of going into these diplomatic matters, I'm going to focus on some of these found technologies. One of them was for a device called gravity manipulator. It could be used to manipulate the gravitational force within a specific area, increasing it or decreasing it will. And that heavily plays into the size of the Noah Two and the multiple

complications regarding its ability of flight.

Luckily, the unearthed information did not contain any weapons technology, which is what some of the countries wanted. It appeared that the ship was just an expedition ship with only one member on board, whom we've found dead... Anyway, I won't go into the details here because they are all on the ship's computer mainframe. You can easily access all of this information by using the decoding key that I gave you.

The single most important thing that has come out of our ten year effort though was the technology of space-warping! The one technology that all the countries were fighting for.

First, I have to say, we have simply no clue about how this technology works. Its theoretical basis, practical application, basically every single one of its details is out of our comprehension. Even the best physicists among us couldn't wrap their heads around it for it defies physics' most basic tenets!

How could you use such minimal energy to deconstruct and then reconstruct the physical arrangement of atoms across space? It was literally unreal." At this point of his monologue, the old man's pained expression was getting more pronounced. He removed his glasses and buffed it before continuing,

"Nevertheless, even without us truly comprehending it, the technology was there. That much was true. And this meant that for humanity, or rather for these countries' government officials at the time, the reality

of space travelling was possible! Its implication on the advancement of physics and science in general aside, this technology would handily resolve what was by then the biggest crisis facing mankind: earth's dwindling resources. Population boom and environmental deterioration made it so that humanity was living on earth's limited sustenance. The fact that we could find a new, hospitable planet beyond the confines of the solar system was huge! It meant that when earth was no more, life could still flourish outside of it!

Therefore, with the greater good of humanity in mind, all these countries headed by the US pooled together their resources to build two gigantic spaceships as contingency plans. This was around the year 2004. The ships were built in two separate locations and each one took about twenty years to complete. The long construction time was due to, firstly, its size, and secondly, our unfamiliarity with the technology. It wasn't a process that could be easily sped up even with massive human and material resources. They were named Noah One and Noah Two, representing a lifeline for humanity should the apocalypse befall the human race...

Noah One was test ran in 2027, and it was a horrendous failure. On it were about 30000 passengers from multiple countries; half of them were military while the other half consisted of experts and academics. They were too late to discover that during warp, the critical mass of objects boomed and thus the energy required to warp it wouldn't increase proportionally in a fixed ratio. The ratio actually quadrupled, differing dangerously from their initial formula and calculations. As a result, the warp failed, the energy expended went way over their reserves, and Noah One

went off in an explosion in space...

Everything else that followed was, I'm sure, to your knowledge. Almost instantly after that first experiment, our astronomers picked up the appearance of a neutron star fragment that was hurtling towards our solar system at lightning speed.

Other than the black hole, which we also know nothing about, the neutron star is the second densest material in space

to our knowledge. It's impossible to retrieve just a fragment from a whole star. Even if two neutron stars were to collide with each other, the chances of them fragmenting off is nil... And yet here we have one, one that appeared out of nowhere! It could only mean one thing... It was warped there to target us!" Barely reigning in his anger, the old man shouted, "It was an attack from the aliens! A lot of scientists have speculated that alien lifeforms are most likely to be hostile. The idea that aliens are all scientifically advanced yet benign and friendly races is a fantasy fed to us by science fiction. History has proven again and again that the greatest

catalyst to advancement has always been war! And let us not forget that war isn't won with brute force but with intelligence, and we have just shown our hand!"

Calming down, the old man continued, "Sorry, but I digress. So back to this spaceship... Noah Two has the same structure as Noah One, but since the miscalculation catastrophe, it has been given the necessary tweaks. The number of nuclear energy generators has increased from the previous one to three, and now they've also been empowered with a uranium-

based solution. Factoring in the amount of supplies and an estimate of 50000 people on board, it could support survival in space for about five years and could do around fifty space warps... But you have to remember one crucial point: for every single gram that is added onto the craft, the energy exhausted during warp will have an exponential increase. When you've rounded up mathematicians or physicists or experts from those fields, you can refer them to the technology's theorems and formulas that I've left in the ship's computer memory.

Other than that, because a lot of energy will be used in that short period of time, or essentially non-time, it might cause overloading, or in some cases, destruction of certain components. Know that this is unavoidable because we are messing with technology that is way beyond our understanding here... We've essentially skipped at least a thousand years of research! Imagine the troglodyte with a gun; we're the troglodyte and this technology's the gun. More often than not, we're going to end up shooting ourselves in the foot. Due to this fear of uncertainty, almost all of the countries have abandoned their hopes on Noah Two and instead

started building their own smaller spacecrafts, crafts that can hold about a maximum of a thousand people, for their own government and people. However, these short-sighted fools don't understand that in the vastness of space, the smaller your base is, the harder it is to operate it and survive.

Nevertheless, because they are smaller, these one-thousand-person crafts can survive decades in space and even warp jump at least a thousand times with ease. As long as nothing happens to their nuclear reservoir, there won't be an

issue with energy depletion for quite some time. This much the human technology could still manage. Which leads to me believe that by the time you see this video, Yao Yuan, most of the higher-ranked officials from earth will have already disappeared."

As the man drew to his conclusion, he sighed, "Yao Yuan, or whoever else that is seeing this, bless you, because the last issue and the one that I feel is the biggest about Noah Two is that because of our current technology, we still have yet to learn how to control the

destination that the warp will end up at. In other words, if you're using Noah Two, it's all luck of the draw and I'll be honest, chances aren't stacked in your favor. To land exactly near a planet that is hospitable to us humans in the endless boundaries space, the probability of that is so small that it can't even be calculated... So, bless you... and bless us all. Amen..."

As the video ended, the screen reverted back to black and the expressions of everyone present were equally blank.

Only Yao Yuan's reaction was different; the video seemed to have brought him great relief. All the strain and pressure from before had melted away.

"Alright, people, things turned out to be in better shape than I expected. At least the ship's functional, and most importantly, it can warp us away from this solar system. That's the key point!" Rounding everyone up, Yao Yuan commented, "Now, let's get moving. Zhang Heng, I still need you to locate the map. We need

to get to central command and assume command immediately. After that, we'll have a meeting to discuss and decide in detail our next course of action."

Surveying his audience, he continued, "But generally speaking, over the next few weeks, we are going to start searching for supplies like food and machinery as well as survivors. Our tentative target is to save at least 1000000 people, prioritizing scientists, academics, technical workers, managerial experts, and able-bodied people. Of course, we should also focus on getting

police officers or soldiers that
have not gone crazy and have
been protecting the public all
this while...

And after all that...
Destination: SPACE!"

Chapter 10: The Rescue!

While Alan was frantically collecting the papers scattered all over his table, a blond-haired lass barged in behind him and yelled, "Quick, dad! Those people will reach our block soon!"

Without lifting his head, he replied, "Coming, Jas, I'm coming. By the way, Jas, have you seen that paper that I wrote on the collision between a high-density object and the sun? It has all those statistics and data on it. I remember distinctly

putting it here somewhere..."

This girl, whom we now know as Jas, ignored her dad's sounds of protest and forcefully dragged him out of the room. The situation was dire; she couldn't care less about some paper or statistics! The pair tumbled their way through the house and out onto the lawn. She had been pulling him onwards like luggage while he was lugging a suitcase. But, once out, they charged through the driveway and jumped into the car. As his daughter started the engine, he started to mumble, "Gone... It's all gone now..."

Jas had not seen her father so distressed before and she was frankly quite afraid herself, but she knew that she had to take charge for both of them. As she drove down the road, she turned to console her dad. "No, dad. Not everything's gone... We're still alive, aren't we?"

"Alive? No, we aren't alive! We're basically the walking dead! Because... well... the world's ending..." As those words left his mouth, all his spirit seemed to have left as well. He sat dazed, staring

blankly at the sun. The sun that had given the world warmth, the sun that had given the world life, and in eight months' time, the sun that will also give the world its end...

Despite being only in his early fifties, Alan was already a world-renowned astrophysicist. By this time in his life, he had already achieved many great things that many people would have spent their whole lives chasing but still wouldn't have gotten.

His wife, God bless her soul,

departed from the world quite some time ago, but she left him with a beautiful, sensible daughter. Overall, he felt blessed. His life was wonderful, or as he liked to put it to himself, life was like his daughter's cooking; it wasn't by any means spectacular, and it certainly couldn't rival that of the five-star chefs, but it was about the taste of home, the taste of love, and those were Alan's favorites...

Unfortunately, that blessing went up in smoke quite drastically and it could all be traced back to the year 2027

which was when news of the discovery of an alien spacecraft by the US government appeared. Alan thought it was some kind of April's Fool joke, so he was delightfully surprised when he found out about the very real space-warp experiment. It could be the discovery of his lifetime and thus he tried many ways to insinuate his way into this project. However, his asset that usually worked in his favor, his age, turned out to be his downfall. The position that he wanted was already given to his more experienced rival, an astrophysicist that enjoyed the same amount of success and fame as he did but was favored because of his seniority. Of

course, his rival's Nobel Prize also tipped the scales against his favor.

This incident had Alan fuming for almost a year, but seeing that there was no other option, he decided to assemble his own team to conduct his own analysis using information that he would gather by pulling strings and favors. However, before his plan could even go into its first phase, the world had taken a turn for the worse.

First was the disappearance of

major players around the world and then were the whistleblowers who leaked information like the fact that the disappeared personnel had actually escaped earth using warp technology. The reason cited for their desertion was a neutron star fragment that was plummeting towards the solar system, or more precisely, its center.

Neutron star? Fragment? Those two didn't link. And how could it have suddenly appeared? It was charging towards the sun? If there was such a thing, there would have been massive reports

before then because a galactic entity doesn't just appear out of thin air.

Therefore, it would be safe to say that Alan was incredulous, but as more evidence and data surfaced, he started to have doubts. The one piece of evidence that truly convinced him though was a satellite picture of the fragment. Being an expert in this field, he could discern real news from fake news, and the hurling death star was very real. As his university and his team of researchers collated data and findings, their result was devastating... None,

not a single soul would be saved. If we were still within the solar system, humanity, no, the world would be wiped out!

After he got the result, the world started to descend into madness and anarchy. Despair had a chokehold on the world and people started to look for catharsis, or in this case, scapegoats. Eventually, the army got involved, but in the end, the army abandoned their responsibilities to the public; they became bullies with guns.

Under those circumstances, Alan and his daughter made the decision to leave the city and move to a more rural area.

However, the countryside didn't contain much solace. People with similar ideas migrated there en masse, and following them were the terrorists. The ugly cycle of mayhem, murder, rape, and sin perpetuated and continued.

Hearing a light knock on the door, Alan opened his eyes to the interior of a decrepit cabin. He

quickly sat up before powerlessly crumbling down onto the wooden pallet he was lying on. He saw a girl with a head of hair that was barely noticeable to be blonde under its layers of mud and dirt rush to him. She worriedly asked, "Dad, are you okay? What are you doing up? Quickly lie back down; you're still running a high fever... Dad, I want to tell you something. I've found a potato farm. There were some rebels nearby, so I didn't dare get close, but I've decided to sneak in later tonight and scavenge some potatoes for us."

Alan was ready to lie down, but after hearing that, he quickly straightened up. "NO! I forbid you from going! Did you forget what we saw a few days ago? Those rebels aren't human, they're animals. That poor girl was only twelve, and she was chopped and roasted before being eaten! So no, you will not be going anywhere tonight!"

Recalling that memory, Jas paled considerably, but then Alan started to hack his lungs up, which steeled her determination. As she moved to take hold of Alan, she softly said, "Don't worry, dad. I'll be

fine. I won't actually go to the field. I'll just hide myself in the drain that encircles the field. We know they have no supply of electricity left, so under the cover of the night, they won't be able to spot me. I'll just dig some potatoes from the side and hurry back... Dad, we haven't had food in almost three days. We can't survive on water. I could probably hold out for a while more, but you're sick, dad. You have to eat something soon!"

Hearing her daughter's determination to proceed with her thoughtless plan, he so wanted to dissuade her, but his

anxiousness made his coughs worse. And between coughs, he could barely get his words out before Jas added, "Dad, I'm a big girl now! You can't tell me what not to do! I'll sneak out and maybe you won't even know it."

Alan finally slowly regained his breath, but it was like the sickness had taken all the fight out of him. The usually eloquent university professor could barely form a cogent sentence before fatigue claimed him. As he fell out of consciousness, he managed to say, "Then I'm going with you. Two pairs of eyes are better than one. I won't let you

do it alone..."

Watching her father's sleeping profile, which had gotten drastically gaunt over the past twenty days, bitter tears couldn't help tumbling out of Jas' eyes.

Later that night, Alan indeed put his words into action and forced himself upon Jas. Jas was afraid that her father would wander out alone when he noticed that she was gone, so she had no choice but to bring him along. Because of his condition, who knows where or who he

might stumble into.

After a harsh journey and two hours later, the pair finally found themselves by the potato field. It was as Jas had said, without electricity and hence, flashlights. The area was in complete darkness. With only the weak moonlight to light the way, one could barely see the things that were two feet in front of them. Jas ordered her father to rest himself on an elevated bank while she scrambled her way into the drain. Slowly, she waded her way through and eventually found her way up onto the

periphery of the field.

Suddenly, sounds of metal jangling started to go off. It turned out that Jas had accidentally tripped on the wire that the rebels had circled around the field as a sort of a primitive alarm. Following the metallic jangles came the hooting of a gaggle of men. Jas was frozen in shock while Alan was barely in his senses.

"Looks like we have a fresh catch tonight, boys! And it's a beauty too... Oh, honey, we're

going to savor you, don't you worry about that, doll. Now, go get her!"

The one issuing the command was a fairly large man. When he saw Jas sprinting her way out of the field, he lifted his rifle and let loose a shot. Jas let out a painful yelp before she went down. Excruciating pain was radiating from her calf. The sound of his daughter's cry energized Alan. He picked his way to his daughter's side within seconds and immediately cocooned her in his arms, using his body to shield his daughter from more shots.

"Oh... Look what we have here, boys. She brought along her sugar daddy... Honey, don't worry. I promise you, we'll treat you much better... And don't worry about this old bag of bones; his dead body will keep the fire warm and going while we take care of you."

When this group of rebels about ten in size appeared in Alan and Jas' sight, Alan couldn't identify any traces of humanity left in them. Their words, actions, and mannerisms exuded devilry. These were

devil's hell-spawns!

"Daddy, I'm scared," sobbed Jas, into her father's chest. She put on a brave face, but she was only a girl of eighteen who had boys chasing after her coattails barely a month ago. Life was beautiful then, but now... she found herself crying in her father's arms. Each of these tears were breaking her desperate father's heart.

Alan, a man of science and thus normally not of faith, prayed the hardest he ever had, "God... If

you're listening, please have mercy... Please just spare us, spare my daughter."

The leader of the group trained his rifle at Alan's head and then a gunshot rang out. It was, however, not Alan's head that was blown off but rather the leader's own. Before anyone else could grasp the situation, another series of shots rang out. Of the ten-something rebels, almost half of them fell dead on the spot. The rest, overpowered, surrendered their weapons and laid down on the ground in repose, not daring to twitch even a muscle.

Then, a ray of light shone out from a distance away. Alan and Jas stared blankly at this ray like deer caught in headlights. Not long later, from behind the light appeared a small troop of men in army fatigue. Alan noticed that they appeared clean as there wasn't one spot of dirt on their uniforms, but more importantly, they were mentally collected. They consisted of Caucasians, African Americans, as well as Asians, and their leader seemed to be a forbidding Asian man.

This man looked

condescendingly at the subdued rebels before scrounging a notebook from within his uniform. On it was a picture of Professor Alan Potter. After making some side-by-side comparisons between it and Alan, who was still on the ground, he gave a small bow.

"Nice to meet you, Professor Alan. I am second lieutenant Ying. You may refer to me by my post or directly by my name. In any case, it is an honor to meet you. I was ordered to locate you and extend an invitation to you to join our government. We desperately need someone with

your expertise and knowledge in astrophysics. If you choose to accept, I will escort you back to our base where you will receive the protection and treatment that are more suitable to your position. We will also provide you with the necessary equipment and sufficient space to conduct your research and experiments. We also hope you will be willing to head an academic group on astrophysics that we have established."

Alan was dazed by the show of civility. Even though it had barely been a month, it had been so long since he had heard

words uttered with such propriety that he couldn't form a response. It wasn't until the man who introduced himself as second lieutenant Ying started to frown that he blabbered, "Yes, right, I accept! Yes, I'm Alan Potter, and this is my daughter, Jas! We do need your protection and help, and do you guys have transportation? My daughter was shot in the leg, so she might not be able to travel far distances, and she also needs immediate medical attention!"

Ying gave Alan a rare smile. As he helped Alan up, he simultaneously waved over one

of the African American soldiers. "Give this miss some rudimentary treatment before we depart." Then, turning to Alan, he added, "Don't worry, we'll give her the full treatment when we get aboard the aircraft, and we will find you a doctor as well, because Professor, you seem to be a bit weak on your feet too. We will ensure that you and your daughter have the rest and medication you need."

Alan gave this group of people one more look. He was handing his and his daughter's lives to them after all. They all had the standard configuration and their

uniforms seemed to be the standard issue for US military... they did appear to be what they claimed.

Right then, Alan heard the sound of propellers and felt gusts churning around them, but in the darkness, he couldn't ascertain what exactly had arrived. His best guess was that it was a helicopter. And since this group of people could afford to deploy vehicles like choppers, they seemed to be an actual, disciplined, organized body of military...

Having that confirmation, Alan finally relaxed and, as the adrenaline wore off, fainted.

What he failed to notice though was Ying calmly giving orders to the rest of his group to execute those rebels who were already begging for mercy.

"Ol' Cap'n's plan worked like a charm. In times like these, people, or at least those that are still sane, want nothing more than order. If we project that, people will gladly come to us. Works much better than

kidnapping them directly into our care..."

After Ying reflected upon that, he turned to address the rest of his man, who were already at attention. "The rescue mission was a success. Get onto the hovercraft. We're reporting back to base."

"Sir, yes, sir!" the soldiers answered in unison.

Almost forty hours later, Alan gradually regained

consciousness. What greeted him was a clean and sparkling white ceiling and an equally white and fluffy quilt that was covering his body. He also managed to take in the fact that he was put on a drip and Jas was lying on a similar bed a short distance away. She was awake and humming along to some music streaming through her ear buds while reading a novel. It was as if the experiences of the past month had been washed away along with all the grime and Jas had reverted back to the girl that she was before all the terrible things started.

Alan didn't have the heart to disturb his daughter. He merely rested his eyes, savoring this joy and contentment that he thought he had lost forever.

Because he had it taken away from him once, he knew how precious this slice of joy actually was. It didn't matter if there were only eight more months left, it didn't matter what this government wanted him to do... he swore that he would do everything within his might to safeguard this joy!

Chapter 11: The Last Human Government!

Three months had passed since Yao Yuan and the Black Star Unit had secured Noah Two.

Within that period, the suffering around the world was still at an all-time high. Every day people died by the millions; some from massacres, some from starvation, and others from sheer hopelessness... It was a recorded fact that whenever the world plummeted into a state of anarchy, an extended period of chaos would prevail

until a powerful group appeared to stamp down on dissent and introduce order.

And so, when the rest of world raged on in chaos, pockets of humanity started to appear in places. These were mostly groups that initially went into seclusion and had basic protection from armed forces that hadn't gone rogue. After three months of hiding, they started to reach out to each other. And like that, seeds of regrowth were sown. If not for the fact that the solar system only had four months of life expectancy left, chances were

high that humanity would rise again from its ashes and rebuild itself.

Within these bands of hold-outs, one rumor was swirling. There was say of a last human government that was in possession of the last spaceship, and that this regime was still on earth searching for survivors!

Many shrugged this off as blind hope, but it was undeniable that this rumor had given many the will to persevere, because isn't all hope essentially blind? Many

had banked their lives on this unverifiable chance at survival.

This last human government that the rumor referred to actually had at its core only fifteen people, fourteen Black Star agents and one who was a member by necessary association.

Within this core was Liu Bai, or as his mates referred to him, Xiao Bai.

Liu Bai was once the son of a

powerful government official, or rather the estranged son of a powerful government official. The estrangement was due to his decision to join the army, a defiance of his family's wishes. Liu Bai had a naturally fair complexion and had the uncanny ability to stay fair even after hours of training under the sun. This unusual condition would have easily singled him out for teasing, but due to his family's background, no one had the guts to keep his company. Not even his seniors dared to put him through traditional hazing. While that saved him from a certain degree of abuse, it also isolated him from the whole.

Not disheartened by the isolation, Liu Bai spent two years in the military proving his worth, distancing himself from the family name. Thanks to his expertise in firearm technicalities, close-quarter combat skills, field medical skills that he had mastered over the two years, and, despite his unwillingness to admit it, his family's influence, Liu Bai managed to become one of the members of the prestigious Hidden Dragon squadron of the four dragons fame.

Later, due to an unfortunate political misstep, Liu Bai's family standing crumbled almost overnight. This loss of favor to the people in power caused Liu Bai to be transferred from the Hidden Dragon squadron to the equally less favored Black Star Unit, where he became the team medic, Xiao Bai.

Now Xiao Bai found himself on a hovercraft, acting as guardian for a family of five as they headed towards the Tennessean base. The eldest of this family was Xiao Bai's rescue target, the renowned German physicist, Silewei Sita. The remaining four

were Sita's family: his wife, his son, his daughter-in-law, and his granddaughter. This family was in a way lucky because they had managed to escape from public ire by hiding themselves in their summer house. Other than dwindling supplies, there was no actual mortality risk.

Nevertheless, by the time Xiao Bai got to them, the lack of supplies had become a real issue, so much so that the family had opted for a suicide pact. Fortunately, aid in the form of Xiao Bai and his seven-member team had arrived before the designated date. Their

professionalism easily convinced Professor Sita to join their cause. His only term was that his family be given treatment that was according to his status quo.

The negotiation went as follows:

"Professor Silewei, please do not worry. We have a working base with reasonable laws and rules. Furthermore, since we would like to invite you to head our physics academic committee as an acting resident professor, you and your family will be

accorded the relevant treatment. Your access to food, supplies, academic and research materials, as well as recreation will be ensured," promised Liu Bai.

With a bluntness known to the Germans, while packing his drafts and materials, Silewei replied, "And I believe you because a normal civilian group wouldn't have the means to acquire a hovercraft. In fact, I'm curious; how did your government come across something of this level of scientific sophistication? The anti-gravitational device, to my

knowledge, isn't something that any of our current countries could build."

Liu Bai merely smiled as response. "That I wouldn't know, Professor. As you know, I'm merely a second lieutenant; I don't have access to information that could answer your question. However, one thing I can tell you is that a safe place will be secured for you and your family before we warp away from Earth within two months' time."

Silewei gave a few incredulous

chuckles before training his eyes on Liu Bai and asked, "Do you have any idea what you have just promised? Does your government even have the necessary spacecraft? A spacecraft that would support thousands of people as it warps through space? I'll be honest with you; I'm highly skeptical of that. First and foremost, space-warping is pure science fiction; it has no basis in reality. And let's say that the technology is real and has been found by your government, the supply of energy that is required to do what you have described is unimaginable. According to the qualitative law, even warping the mass of a normal adult man

would need an amount of energy that would rival that of the sun, much less what you are suggesting... However, in any case, even if everything's just a pipe dream, for letting my family pass the final four months in civility and in peace, you and your body of government have my sincerest gratitude."

Liu Bai was flustered into awkward laughs. After all, he was a soldier, not a scholar or a scientist; he wouldn't know how to argue scientific principles with researchers of Silewei's stature.

Due to the lack of combustion and friction, the hovercraft travelled in silence. In comparison to fighter jets, it traveled much faster and much more quietly. Within a day's time, the hovercraft that ferried Liu Bai and Silewei's family arrived at the secret base within the valley.

A lot had changed in this valley compared to the first time Yao Yuan's group had arrived. Even if it was already nighttime when they arrived, the place was as bright as day because multiple

incandescent lamps had been placed around the valley. Furthermore, unlike its initial state of desertion, the entrance to the valley had at least five hundred soldiers standing in patrol. Further in, the grounds was covered with a sea of tents. However, it was obvious that the placement was strategic. Even though it appeared cluttered, care had been taken to leave space in certain areas to allow for ease of human and vehicular traffic. Between the camp area and the entrance to the base was a one-thousand-square-meter field that was purposely left empty. The entrance to the secret base was guarded by about fifteen armed soldiers, while on

the field were hundreds of people in the midst of jolly-making. There was dancing, singing, and campfires. If one was to take out the sentries, the place looked more like a huge carnival than an army camp.

This took Silewei and his family by complete surprise. They were expecting camps of people wallowing in doomsday prophecies, or a highly sanitized military base with lots of protocols, or a hidden laboratory where they would be given sufficient food and protection but would be under surveillance twenty-four/seven.

Noticing the confusion and surprise on Silewei's and his family's faces, Liu Bai smiled and replied, "Didn't I already tell you, Professor Silewei? We aren't a militaristic government. It is not our intention to dominate or rule; we merely want to save as many people as we can. The people you see before us are civilian survivors that we have managed to round up from around the globe. It might sound cruel, but since the spaceship can only support up to a certain capacity, the people here are those that are healthy and young, not in need of serious medical treatment, with

no conviction of any felony, and with basic education. Of course, if these people have families that are still intact, we try to accommodate the whole family due to humanistic reasons.

Until today, we have managed to gather around 87000 people. There are around three thousand that are either children or are below the age of fifteen and about four thousand people that are above fifty-five while the rest are aged from fifteen to fifty-five..."

As Liu Bai continued his brief introduction of things inside this valley, Silewei agitatedly came forward and grabbed his hand. With tears in his eyes, Silewei gushed, "Now I have faith in your promise and your spaceship. I simply would like to personally express my gratitude for your government's willingness to open its arms to accept these people... Truly, thank you from the bottom of my heart."

Liu Bai was so ruffled by this sudden burst of emotion that he was unsure what the acceptable way to respond was. He ended

up just smiling his way through. Right then, about ten soldiers ran to greet their arrival. After confirming everyone on board, one soldier registered Silewei's family. The information was saved onto a laptop and later into cloud storage for ease of access and planning. After that, Silewei and his family had their pictures individually taken before each being handed a keycard.

Liu Bai apologetically said, "So sorry for the inconvenience, Professor Silewei. That was necessary protocol. These keycards here are essentially

your proof of identity, so please take care of them. When we are ready to move everybody onto the spaceship, these keycards will ensure that you and your family are given early access, which will allow you to pick the bedchamber that you prefer before everyone else gets on board. If you wait here, someone will arrive shortly to bring you and your family to the residential area that is further in the valley. It is temporary, but it is equipped with amenities like a kitchen, bathrooms, bedrooms, and a living room. It also has rudimentary electrical appliances. And, professor, this shall be where we part for I am required to report back to duty."

As he said so, he gave Silewei a salute and a handshake before turning towards the secret base's entrance.

Silewei's family was overjoyed. They never expected this kind of treatment. In fact, everything was way above their expectations. The fact that they were given an official keycard and a residential unit put them above the rest who were residing in tents. It was a good feeling, albeit not one that was decorous to sound out loud.

Just then, two jeeps stopped by their side. Almost instantly, two soldiers jumped down from it. One of them was a giant African American who gave Silewei a salute and said, "Professor Silewei, I've been tasked to lead the way to your residence. So please, get on and take a seat." And then he stood at attention by the jeep, waiting for Silewei and his family to ascend.

Silewei turned to look at his family and nodded his agreement. After everyone was safely seated, the jeeps started to move in the direction that went deeper into the valley.

As the jeeps picked up speed, Silewei turned to look at the entrance of the base where Liu Bai was heading towards. Spotting no one else there anymore, he turned back and sank comfortably into his seat. After retrieving from his chest pocket a cigar that he had saved for the day his family would kill themselves, he released a satisfied and relieved sigh. He then proceeded to light the cigar. He was thankful that it was for a celebratory occasion and not otherwise.

As Silewei puffed out smoke rings, he opined, "It sure is nice here..."

The African American soldier beside him nodded his agreement and guffawed, "Yes, it surely is nice here. In comparison to things outside this base, it is as nice as paradise here..."

"This is indeed a slice of heaven. So, son, in the next four months or so, please protect it well. There is much hope and joy here, and these are the only

things left that are worth protecting..."

Steely determination entered the soldier's gaze and he nodded purposefully. As the music from the field became vaguer as they drove further into the valley, tears started rolling down their faces.

Chapter 12: Yao Yuan's Tactics and... Departure Preparation!

Going back to when the Black Star Unit had just acquired Noah Two, we find the group in the middle of their team meeting, discussing and planning what to do next.

Seated on the captain's chair, Yao Yuan surveyed the fourteen people that surrounded him... His eyes fell on Zhang Heng. Granted there were still some kinks that needed to be worked

out between the teen and the rest of the Black Star Unit. It was undeniable that the hacker had played a most crucial role in their success of securing Noah Two. Between that and the long time they had spent together, it would seem like Zhang Heng had assimilated naturally into becoming a Black Star, but of course, a lot more time would still be needed to provide him with the necessary training for it to be official.

Yao Yuan declared, "While we have completed our first objective of securing a functional spaceship, there

remains a lot to be done before we can leave this planet.

As I've said, we need human resources! We need 100,000 at least 100,000 people to be on this ship when we leave!"

Looking his audience in their eyes, Yao Yuan solemnly continued, "We have to understand that our friends did not sacrifice themselves for us to float around in space for a few years and then languish to our deaths. No! Their sacrifices were to help us secure survival, to

find a hospitable planet and flourish!

But for that to happen, we need people! Unity is strength; only with enough people can we have the necessary strength and knowledge to succeed and survive. Unlike those officials who were unable to see this, we shall not go seeking for lonely death in space!"

Stopping mid-speech, Yao Yuan pointed at Ebon and asked, "Are you familiar with steelmaking, Ebon?"

Scratching his head, Ebon answered, "Ol' Cap'n, do you want to know about casting iron and making steel? I've read a book on it."

Shaking his head, Yao Yuan laughed and replied, "Nah, I'm talking about the actual process that goes into making steel. Do you know how to do that?"

Ebon shook his head straightforwardly. "Sorry, Ol' Cap'n. I'm unfamiliar with all that, but if you would like me to

try hammering some steel, I suppose I could."

Yao Yuan gave another laugh and then pointed at Guang Zhen, "Ol' Wong, could you explain to us the formula of the qualitative law? From which theory does it originate from?"

Stunned by the sudden quiz, Guang Zhen gave it quite some thought before replying, "I could only remember vaguely the simplest part of the law, the part about the speed of light. Beyond that... I'll be frank, Cap'n. I'm

not a physics scholar, so why would I be familiar with it?"

Without replying, Yao Yuan turned to Xiao Bai. "Xiao Bai, you're our medic. Then I assume you know about reactions that happen during pharmaceutical drug synthesis. This should be up your alley, right?"

Xiao Bai laid his out hands in surrender. "There's no link between the two, Cap'n. Being a medic doesn't mean that I know pharmaceutical chemistry. If you want to know about

emergency aid or surgery procedures, those I can tell you about, but if you're going to ask me about synthesizing drugs, then I'm afraid I'm of no help."

After some hearty guffaws, Yao Yuan straightened himself and said, "Indeed, I am just the same as you all. If you were to ask me about steelmaking, qualitative law, or drug synthesis, I too could only tell you the basics. We are all equally in the dark about these things, but it is not something to be ashamed of. Everyone has their own expertise. We are living in the information era now; knowledge

has gotten very specialized. Yes, basic information could be easily gleaned off the internet, but for specialized knowledge, we will need specialized experts.

It is impossible to tell what will happen in space. What we will encounter? Let us imagine a scenario where somewhere on this spaceship, a component has broken down. What would we do? The answer would to be repair or replace it, but how do we repair it, what do we replace it with, and what if we run out of the necessary parts and need to cast some new ones? These are questions we have to

concern ourselves with. Furthermore, let's say we do find a new planet. What's next? Start by building huts and setting rocks? I'm sorry, but I have no intention of restarting from the Stone Age, so...

We need people! People with talents! Scholars, scientists, technicians, and able-bodied men and women! We need to think of longevity here. It is these people that will be the force that will keep this ship running!"

Stressing his point, Yao Yuan stood up to address everyone present. "Ideally we should first assemble a scientific community, but for that, we will need a search and rescue task force which is impossible to form with only fifteen of us. It'll be a pain locating them, not to mention the difficulty in convincing them to join us without a stable base to back us. Furthermore, as the number of civilians we rescue increases over time, we will need armed forces in place to safeguard both our and their safeties, to prevent chaos around us, and most importantly, to prevent sabotage to this ship.

Therefore, we first need to draft a set of rules! To maintain control within a chaotic world, this is necessary, and of course, we need to make sure that these laws aren't oppressive... Under this lawful system, we will need to erect a commanding center. This is so that people under us won't create dissent and the army we recruit will heed our orders. We need to appear constitutionalized and systematic, and not as a disposable bunch of special ops agents.

Therefore, we will first return to China to recruit about twenty

soldiers. It goes without saying that they must still be disciplined soldiers that haven't turned on the public in these desperate times. This small group shall form the base of our law enforcement, and after that, this secret base shall be made off limits. Other than the fifteen of us, everybody else will be denied entry and trespassers shall be executed. It sounds harsh, but we are aiming for effectiveness here, so nothing short of the death penalty will work. Next, we need to set up our ranks, but they can't too high because we need to create a façade that there's a central committee that we still report to. After that, a month will be spent to recruit

about two hundred members of law enforcement. We must arrange these members into specific ranks and file according to their ability. This will ensure a basis for building a civilized, systematic community.

With an official center constructed, we can launch into search and rescue operations as well as military expansion. Civilians rescued will be located outside in the valley, and it will best to expand our law enforcement to a number of a thousand by then. Three months will be allocated for this effort. After that, we will need

to focus our efforts on securing materials, food, and supplies, but regarding the amount and type of supplies, we will still need consultation from our scientific community, so that can come later.

From henceforth, my rank is major and Wong is captain. Everyone else will be ranked as second lieutenant... Zhang Heng, even though you're not an official member of the Black Star Unit, we count you as an honorary one, so you'll be taking the rank of sergeant. However, you'll need to quit your drug addiction first and undergo

some necessary physical and firearms training. When you've mastered those, you'll be promoted to an official Black Star and a second lieutenant. Anyone have any issues?"

Zhang Heng was delightfully surprised by this arrangement because he originally thought that he would be abandoned after he had outlived his use. He even feared that he might be silenced, so the fact that he was given the rank of sergeant was way beyond his expectations. Furthermore, when considering that even Yao Yuan only had the rank of Major even though he

was the leader, the rank of sergeant was already high enough. He gladly accepted this arrangement.

Settling that, Yao Yuan continued, "One last thing. I've never said I'm a saint, but we must always remember our roots... So, I only have one request, and that is for the eventual population on the spaceship to be at least a fifty-percent Chinese."

Liu Bai thought back to their initial meeting under that shop

basement. He felt heartened that Yao Yuan had issued the command to gather, because everything had occurred according to his plans. Noah Two might've been the last hope of humanity, and Yao Yuan was the one who brought that hope into reality.

In the next few months, the Black Star Unit was divided into three main task forces. One was responsible for rescue operations of academics. Another was focused on rounding up survivors around the world. Of course, necessary care was taken to ensure that

the survivors that were selected were of sound mind and body. The last team was responsible for collecting supplies.

Liu Bai was in the rescue task force. The missions weren't all successful because of the over one hundred targets, they only managed to rescue about twenty. Most of them had died while others had already left earth previously. However, these twenty were all scholars of great importance in their respective fields. The world's remaining treasured minds!

Yao Yuan's plan of first establishing a systematic front had worked wonders in these past months. With a clear-cut hierarchy, the soldiers knew of a chain of command and the citizens knew that there was the law to adhere to. This attracted the scholars to join because they knew that they could conduct their research in peace.

The originally somewhat hollow mirage of a government had filled out into a full-fledged regiment which had 1200 law enforcement officers, about 10,000 citizens, 7000 technical workers, as well as 600

respected members of the scientific community.

After Liu Bai descended the elevator, he strode towards the giant door at the end of the corridor. As he approached, the thirty soldiers on guard duty saluted him. Even though they all knew of their second lieutenant, Liu Bai was still requested to present his keycard. They knew that protocol had to be followed.

Even though the proximity of spaceship was still off limits to

the general public, access had already been granted to scientists, technicians, and a selected pool of military personnel at this point. There was no strict implementation of rules, but thanks to a sense of sovereignty, the community had started to self-regulate.

After confirming his identity, Liu Bai went into the secret base. The enormous spacecraft that greeted him was still an unfamiliar sight. He wondered when and if he would get used to its enormity. He took a jeep ride to the cabin door and after a short trip on its inner rail

locomotive that had been recently reactivated, he arrived at central command.

Even though he was still outside the door, he could hear loud arguments coming from within. The sounds of an altercation gave him a shock and he quickened his step. As he went in, he saw Yao Yuan in the middle of trying to pacify a dispute that had erupted within a group of seven or eight elderly gentlemen.

"Alan, I'm telling you, there is a

glaring mistake in your calculation! What analysis did you use for the acceleration calculation? I'm guessing **band analysis**, but that is erroneous because you have to consider the effect of refraction caused by the gravitational pull of the neutron fragment's high density. So instead, you have to use..." argued a frail-looking old man in a booming voice that mismatched his appearance.

Unwilling to back down, Alan gave a fierce counter argument, looking dangerously ready to physically assault his opponent. Waving his data before his

opponent's face, Alan replied, "Don't be ridiculous. Of course I've thought of the issue of light refraction! I stand firm on the conclusion of my analysis. I've calculated the speed of acceleration within a specific unit of time through triangulation of the perpendicular intersection of bending point and non-bending point of wavelength using band analysis of the un-refracted light wave at the periphery. How is that wrong? Or do you have a better analytical method, Professor Calum Feta?"

"As a matter of fact, I do..."

retorted Professor Feta.

As the argument continued, Yao Yuan silently made his way to Liu Bai's side and asked, "Was the mission successful, Xiao Bai? Were we able to locate the German physicist, Professor Silewei?"

Liu Bai nodded in confirmation. "Affirmative. He is now safely in our case and he looks very much satisfied with the conditions of the base... By the way, what are they arguing about?"

Yao Yuan laughed awkwardly before silently disclosing, "They took a few hovercraft trips to the American Astronomical Centre to help pinpoint the date in which the asteroid will near the solar system and thus ascertain our time of departure. But because they couldn't agree on a method, there appeared two camps with two different results. And as you can see, they don't exactly see eye to eye with one another. Alan thinks we should proceed with the warp before the twelfth next month or the risk will drastically increase due to gravitational distortion. Calum, on the other hand, believes we still have two months' time. Who knows why

they would have a month's difference in between..."

Liu Bai smiled, noting that he empathized with the situation. After these experts had settled into their lifestyles around the base, they threw themselves back into work with a fiery passion. It was as if they were working for lost time where their knowledge was suppressed in favor of baser needs. They had new requests and updates almost daily. The effort needed to negotiate this academic diplomacy gave even Yao Yuan an increasing headache.

"Then what's the plan, Ol' Cap'n? Will it be next month or the month after? I hope Cap'n understands that we are still unable to locate Zhang Heng's father," chimed Liu Bai.

"I have to be responsible for everyone here, so I think we shouldn't risk it. We'll depart next month. Take this last month to secure as much food, water, and equipment as possible. Also, don't stop looking for the remaining scholars. Send for Ying and tell him to use his sleuthing expertise to aid Zhang

Heng. We are going to try all we can to find his father within this last month..."

"Then finally... we depart!"

Analytical apparatus used to measure the minimum distance between products or compute and visualize the areas on products corresponding to a minimum distance within a user-defined range. Has a wide range of uses, including analysis of stock trading trajectory.

Chapter 13: The Final Days!

It was the winter of the year 2029 and a troop of two hundred soldiers was making their way towards a nearby city. Upon closer inspection, one could discern that this motorized team was carrying along a hoard of everyday supplies like food and water. It was obvious that it was on supply acquisition detail.

There were still 15 days left to the date of departure and everyone was on their final leg of supply gathering. By that

time, the base was housing about 120,000 people. Of those people, half of them were Asian with the Chinese totaling at 50000. There were also 13000 civilians from the US, 14000 from European countries, and another 12000 from Australia and Canada. Rounding up the population were 9000 so Africans. The academic community had grown to about 900 people, while technical workers such as engineers and smiths were about 300 in number. They were protected by an army about 1500 in size.

Thankfully, Noah Two was

spacious enough to support such a big population. After all, it had been assembled with worldwide corroboration and had taken twelve years of construction with an initial purpose of space colonization. Calling it a spaceship would be a misnomer; it was more precisely a space city. Its size spanned an exact thirty-five kilometers going one direction and 2.4 kilometers going another with a height of three hundred and seventy meters! It was a momentous mechanical accomplishment, one worthy of being called the ninth modern wonder!

It had a maximum capacity of 120000 people! With enough supplies, it could sustain a population of this size ten years in space!

However, as Yao Yuan's team had found out, it had ironically been abandoned due to its impressive size. Since warping required an immense supply of force, Noah Two's size was a hindrance. This was not even considering the people that it would have on board during warp! That's why Yao Yuan's initial plan was only to gather 100000 people, but after five months of rescue and selection,

they had ended up with 120000 people. Even though they had tightened their selection standards, they didn't really have the heart to turn people away to their deaths. And so in the end, they decided that they would just have to make do with the excess 20000 people.

Due to this stringent screening process, these 120000 people in general were citizens of good standing. There were no felons and their general level of education was above average. Counting the scientific and technical community, the strength of this population could

very well rival that of the best mid-sized countries of the twenty-first century!

Following this gigantic population was a rise in supply demand. They needed a stock of clean water, food, everyday necessities, and materials that could last them for an extended period in space. Resources were the only things they couldn't skimp on, because these were the things that would be unavailable after they leave Earth. There was no guarantee what they would need in space, and that was why the list of resources had undergone five

updates, each time broadening the categories of items they would need. The supply acquisition task force had also increased accordingly from the original fifty people to a staggering four hundred. The one task force had also grown into two, and they had been busy scouring America's major cities for supplies.

The troop we met at the beginning was such an acquisition unit. The two hundred soldiers were recruited from around the globe from forces of different loyalties, but they were all now subordinates

to the unit's leader, Guang Zhen. Guang Zhen's motorized convoy had gone through six other cities already and was on the journey to their last stop before returning to base.

Based on the freeway sign above him, Guang Zhen could tell that they were thirty kilometers away from their destination. Based on the speed they were going, it would be dark by the time they entered the city. It had been five months since the initial eruption of chaos, but it was still impossible to tell whether the city they were heading into still had rebel

hold-outs. Despite their better discipline and equipment, Guang Zhen wouldn't want to risk any casualties if not truly necessary.

Hence, he made the decision to halt progress and set up camp for the night. Using his walkie-talkie, the order was relayed. "Cease all movement. Units one, two, and three, canvas the area. The rest prepare to set up camp. I repeat..."

His team dispersed into action. An area was quickly zoned out

using their vehicles, and within the quarantined area, tents were erected. Before sunset, a temporary encampment was completed by the freeway. After their perimeter had been cleared, the overall atmosphere of alertness quickly devolved into one of cheer.

The dinner for the troop that night was scrumptious. This was because even though lots of shops has already been raided, more concrete storage spaces such as warehouses were safe from vandals. These were treasure troves of valuable supplies. And since some of

these perishables wouldn't last the journey back to base, the supply team was never short on upscale food and luxury.

The menu served by the culinary attachment that night was roasted rib-eye with caviar sauce and fruits dessert. Coupled with deluxe cigars that weren't normally available to these members of military, life was fine.

Amiable conversations also streamed back and forth within the encampment. Topics of

conversation included their families, loved ones, and their hopes for the future. It was Yao Yuan's intention to primarily recruit army officers with family members remaining to foster a sense of belonging to the community they served. Incidentally, this helped bridge strong bonds between these family men. Knowledge that their service in the military granted their family members preferential treatment, like the fact that they wouldn't need to brave the elements in tents but rather in secured residences, also contributed to this cocoon of camaraderie and joy.

Even Guang Zhen found himself engaged in affable exchanges with his troops.

Between bites, an African soldier next to him commented, "Second lieutenant, everything's nice with the base, but why is everyone's rank so low? For example, I used to be a navy lieutenant but now I'm just an upper class soldier. The huge demotion surely needs some getting used to, and my friend here, Tom, he's now an ordinary soldier even though before this he was a navy sergeant. He almost chewed my ears off griping about this."

Guang Zhen laughed off the question, thinking these men weren't really concerned about frivolous matters such as ranking, but he then realized they were all waiting attentively for his explanation. Clearing his throat, he said, "That's because the whole of our military is only one thousand plus large. How could we have so many sergeants or lieutenants? Imagine a unit where everyone's a sergeant and one lieutenant. Or a unit where the leading field officer has subordinates that are all sergeants. It's just impractical, so unless there's an expansion, everyone will be demoted a

rank. It can't be helped."

Another Caucasian soldier piped up, "Second lieutenant, honestly though, why haven't we expanded? An institution of only 1.5 thousand is disproportionately small when compared to a population of 120000. Our hands are full with miscellaneous tasks like rescue, patrol, search, and even resolving civilian conflict. A brother of mine, also an upper class soldier, is now tasked with handling civil disputes. He has been complaining to me non-stop, saying that he wishes dearly to be out in the field. So,

second lieutenant, maybe we should consider expanding? Or perhaps setting up a police branch?"

Guang Zhen shook his head and replied, "We have to understand that we are the military, and there's jurisdiction. What you're suggesting goes under the executive and legislative sectors. The decision process is out of our hands. The most we can do is submit suggestions. But I did overhear the major saying that there is a plan underway to establish a committee staff to make the military branch's competency system more

robust, and that would make expansion necessary."

The few upper class soldiers were excited at hearing this because it carried with it the prospect of promotion, which would bring along with it direct and indirect benefits, and even if it didn't, a higher rank still had a better ring to it than being an upper class soldier.

Suddenly, in the middle of the conversation, a shrill whistle sounded off not far away. Every soldier reflexively readied their

weapon, and the upper class soldiers rallied their respective units as they waited for orders from Guang Zhen. Guang Zhen signaled his order and a few squads trailed him as he moved towards the direction of the whistle.

They were quite dumbfounded by what they discovered. It wasn't rebels but hundreds of refugees.

The group was wide-ranging in terms of gender and age, but what was similar were the looks

of destitution. Every single of them looked small and frail, hollow and afraid. A few of the younger among them had wooden clubs as weapons, but with some of them barely having the energy to stand, it was hard to see them as threatening.

They were probably attracted by the light and smell of food from the camp. As they walked into the circle of light, they stared dumbly at the gaggle of military before them. Slowly, the dullness in their eyes turned into suspicion, fear, and finally, amazement. Nevertheless, none of them stepped forth or spoke a

word; they just stood there, rooted to the ground, staring at the space before them.

The soldiers turned their attention back to Guang Zhen, but they didn't relax their alerted stances. Their weapons were still aimed at the group of unexpected dinner guests.

After a moment of hesitation, Guang Zhen issued an order to an upper class soldier beside him. "Get two units to help them. Erect another camp next to ours and give them some

food... After that, you know the protocol; inquire and screen for people that we could bring along."

Gladdened at his second lieutenant's show of mercy, the soldier saluted and carried on with his order.

Under the troops' guidance, the refugees were led to the encampment with Guang Zhen trailing behind silently. While they were in the middle of dispensing food, another trilling screech screamed through the

air, which put everyone back on alert once more. A few seconds later, a pinprick of light appeared down the horizon. The halo of light grew in size until they realized it was a hovercraft heading their way.

This made Guang Zhen apprehensive. All these anti-gravity-operated hovercrafts were futuristic vehicles that they had found within Noah Two. There were only thirty of them in total, and they all had been chartered to search for important rescue targets such as researchers or scientists. The fact that one was heading

towards them sounded an alarm. Maybe there was trouble back at base?

Without losing much time, Guang Zhen ordered his men to clear an empty space for landing. As the hovercraft hit the ground, a few soldiers rushed out, saluted Guang Zhen, and requested him to join them onboard. They told Guang Zhen that a higher official wished to speak with him through the craft's communication device.

Gripped by anxiety, Guang

Zhen rushed aboard the hovercraft. As he picked up the communication receiver, from the other end came Yao Yuan's agitated voice.

"Wong, there is a change of plans. The asteroid had a sudden acceleration this afternoon. The astrophysics team has issued a state of emergency. Their most optimistic evaluation gives us five more days, but their advice is that we leave within the next 24 hours... Tell your team to pack up and prepare for warp, which is scheduled at six P.M tomorrow. But you take the hovercraft and return here

immediately. We have a Black Star mission, and it's related to Zhang Heng and Ying..."

"When they were searching for Zhang Heng's father around China, they were ambushed by a foreign army. The entire search party was wiped out except for Ying, who barely escaped alive, and Zhang Heng, who was captured. The enemy party somehow knew about a spaceship being in our possession and demanded that they be brought along! We shall not be intimidated by such a despicable request!

I've called the remaining Black Stars to gather and I need you to lead them and another five hundred soldiers to dismantle their base of operations! Take the hovercraft and electro-magnetized ammunition and bring Ying and Zhang Heng safely back to the base before six P.M tomorrow! We shall not be deterred now!"

Chapter 14: Of One Root!

"If I remember correctly, you aren't a member of the Black Star Unit," said the man seated before Zhang Heng. He was well-built and had a series of facial scars that lent him a streak of menace.

The room Zhang Heng was in was cramped and enclosed. It appeared to be an interrogation room of some police station. It had been three days since their unit was ambushed at Town H. The ambush was definitely well-

organized, because it had surprised even Ying, the expert in ambush warfare. Everyone was killed other than Ying who, despite suffering a stomach bullet wound, managed to slip away through the sewers, and Zhang Heng, who was captured after getting shot in the arm.

In the past three days, to Zhang Heng's surprise and relief, there was no application of torture. As a matter of fact, he even received treatment for his bullet wound. They had extracted the slug and even gave him antibiotics. It was only on the third day that he was brought to this interrogation

room before this man who revealed himself as the leader of a rebel army of a few thousand. The man whom the rest referred to as Chou.

Taking in deep breaths to steady himself, Zhang Heng replied, "I, I have nothing to tell you because I have not even heard of the Black Star Unit..."

This gave Chou a pause before he laughed out loud. He addressed Zhang Heng without a hint of ire in his voice. "Oh, sorry, I forgot you're here. The

statement wasn't addressed to you; I was merely talking to myself there. I'm pretty sure you have nothing to do with the Black Star Unit. I would have known if you were one them, although I suppose they could have recruited new members recently... But I doubt you're even military, so don't worry."

Caught off guard by Chou's comment, Zhang Heng blurted out, "But aren't you here to interrogate me?"

Smiling, Chou answered,

"Interrogate you? Now, why would I do that... I believe that everything you know I already know. For example, I know where you're from. A Tennessean base housing a spaceship, right?"

Zhang Heng was visibly perturbed by the man's casual dropping of confidential information. He could barely mount a response.

Seeing Zhang Heng's flabbergasted response, Chou chuckled, "Don't look so scared.

I have no intention to harm you. In fact, you're not here to be interrogated at all, and that information about your base... It's really not that hard to deduce. Your people have been trekking all over the world drafting able-bodied civilians and bright minds. Even if we're in the middle of anarchy, obvious activities like that aren't really that hard to miss. And with all of this information, it doesn't take a genius to put two and two together, which again tells me that you aren't a Black Star member, because they wouldn't need me to spell out something this obvious for them."

Fearing the answer, Zhang Heng hesitated for a while before finally asking, "If that's the case, then why am I here?"

Instead of answering, Chou retrieved a photograph from his pocket and dumped it on the table between them. Zhang Heng could feel tears pricking his eyes as his sight fell on the photograph. It was a portrait of his family, a memento from better times. A family of three was smiling brightly at the camera. There was his mother, who unfortunately had died in

the earlier days of the riot, and his father, whose location was still unknown. The sight of his parents pierced a shard of grief through his heart.

"Where did you get this photo? It has never left my father's wallet!" he demanded hurriedly.

Chou explained, "That's right. I heard about your team's objective, so while you're in here, I gathered all my resources to help you finish what you started. I'm sorry to say, but this man in the photo died three

months ago in an outbreak. Due to the rarity of his size during these times and the fact that he had a gun on him, he made quite an unforgettable impression on one of my men, so when I issued the search details, he came forth and I took this picture from him. Keep it, it's yours after all."

Afraid Chou might renege on his words, Zhang Heng hastily stored the treasured photo and then said, "If you're expecting me to repay your kindness, then I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. I have no say within the Black Star Unit... But making a case to take a few more people

along, that I could still do. That's your purpose after all, isn't it?"

Chou snickered at the suggestion before ominously adding, "You, my friend, are sorely mistaken... I have no interest in getting aboard that ship. I agree that it might be a different story if the ship was found by somebody else, but the thought of having to exist in the same space as that hypocrite... I'd rather die... So, I don't need your help; I just need you to stay put and be good bait. If I know that son of a bitch, and I think I do, he'll order his men to come save you soon, so you just sit still

until then...

And then, my revenge against the Black Star Unit will be complete..."

The time was already nine in the morning when Yao Yuan awakened from his sleep.

Guang Zhen's unit had departed for China seven hours ago. With the best firearms and bullet-proof vests, as well as satellite triangulation and hovercraft technology, there were simply

no forces left on earth that could stand a chance against them. That much was certain.

But a sliver of apprehension remained lodged in Yao Yuan's mind. It had to do with the person he had just dreamed of... The traitorous Black Star that he had eliminated way back when the squad was training on one of the space stations... But why would he dream of him now...

Added to that was the out-of-body feeling that he had first experienced when they initially

breached the base. That feeling had gotten more and more pronounceable in the recent months... They all seemed tied to that episode on the space station...

"I'm coming, Ol' Wong. Until then, please be careful because I sense a great danger out there..." prayed Yao Yuan silently. He then peered at the control panel of the hovercraft he was traveling in. It showed 9.30 a.m... He had left half an hour after Guang Zhen's unit departed. He hoped he wasn't too late...

A few hundred miles away, the Black Star Unit and another five hundred soldiers were preparing to engage the enemy. The group had been separated into multiple sub-units, each with a Black Star leading the way to infiltrate their enemy's base. They were able to locate their enemy so quickly because the hovercrafts they used were connected to earth's satellites. By tracing Zhang Heng's and Ying's transmission signals, they were able to quickly pinpoint the location where Zhang Heng was held. It was a deserted skyscraper in the middle of the city next to a police station.

They even managed to discern that the enemy had about three thousand people. After removing the harmless ruffians and civilians that they had managed to sway to their side though, the actual number of armed rebels had an expected maximum number of only eight hundred.

It was an easy mission, so Guang Zhen wasted no time because they needed to get to Zhang Heng fast. In hostage rescue operations such as this, time was of essence.

"Move! Move! Move!
Lieutenants and sergeants, get
your units coordinated! Get
moving!" Guang Zhen ordered
out of habit, in Chinese. When
he realized that most of his team
had remained waiting for his
order, he repeated it in English.

Almost instantly, fourteen
hovercrafts sped into the
building, their outer
machinegun turrets blazing. The
outermost patrols were
decimated under the hail of
bullets, some even fracturing
into pieces. Soon after, a

piercing alarm shot through the building.

Guang Zhen lifted his head and spotted a hovercraft landing on the roof. It was the scouts led by Lee. Their point of entry was from above. In the hovercraft, as Guang Zhen loaded his gun and checked his vest, he issued for landing and ordered his men to prepare to storm the building.

As the craft touched the ground, under his orders, his team spread out to secure the structure...

"Hahaha... Look at them! Walking step by step into my plan!" cackled Chou, who was watching all this unfolding through a surveillance screen in the adjacent police station. With the difference in technology available in mind, he knew that his men had no chance against Yao Yuan's troops, so instead, he used this inequality to his advantage. Stationing the place with just enough mobs to feed into the opponent's sense of triumph, the skyscraper was essentially a giant trap luring Guang Zhen's troop in with a trail of small victories.

While noting his enemies' movements through the screen, he elaborated, with dripping malevolence, "Here's a little trivia for you. I was a spy sent by the higher-ups to infiltrate the Black Star Unit. Espionage like this was actually extremely common. It was to the government's benefit to keep tabs on special ops units such as the Black Star Unit. In fact, before Yao Yuan became the leader, there was a long history of spies in the squad. If you think about it, it was actually a symbiotic relationship; the government was more willing to grant the squad with a larger

budget and more supplies if they knew what was truly happening... But Yao Yuan, that bastard, when he found out, he wanted to silence me when we were training on the space station, dismissing everything that I had done for the squad!

No thought went into his mind that I had a family to support, because unless necessary, who would volunteer as a spy? But no, he never saw things from my perspective and gave me no chance. If not for my luck, I would have been a floating carcass in space by now. But thanks to him, everything I had

was taken away from me. Because of political reasons, those politicians were unable to tell my family I was actually a spy but instead spun some story about how I was a foreign mole and had to be eliminated. I never heard from them after that. Those bloody officials, they turned on me!"

Chou's narration had gotten to a point where he was almost yelling everything out, but he caught himself here. After some time, he continued, in a tone that was contrastingly and eerily calm, "But no worries; today I'll expose Yao Yuan for the

hypocrite that he is. He always says that nothing is more important than your comrades and mates. Well, what the hell am I? But that's alright; I'll make mass graves out of his so-called comrades and let's see whether he'll use the remaining time to avenge his supposed comrades or if he will escape like the coward that I know he is..."

Chou slipped from within his uniform a tiny remote and then resumed his monologue as if he didn't notice Zhang Heng, who was scared shitless beside him. "Guess what this is... It's connected to explosives that I've

collected over the past few months... And bingo! They have been deployed throughout the building... With just a soft click, the place will be flattened in a matter of seconds..." Chou turned to peer at the screen. "There're still a few units not within the range, but soon... We'll have a fireworks display on our hands... Exciting, isn't it..."

Zhang Heng looked at the monitor in increasing despair as Guang Zhen's troops gradually filled up the screen. Before long, they managed to secure the whole building.

Chou laughed manically, but right before his finger touched the remote button, a shadow swooped in through the window behind Zhang Heng, sending pieces of glass flying everywhere. As the person safely rolled into a soft landing, he unbuckled his gun and released a shot at Chou. Years of training helped Chou dodge the shot by leaping back. He even managed to return fire at the intruder.

"Yao Yuan! How dare you still show your face around me?!"

"It is you, Ning Bo Tao! You survived space?!"

"Yes, I survived, but unfortunately for you, today you won't!"

To Zhang Heng, it was a scene right out of the Matrix. Somehow, in between dodging bullets, the two men still had time to fire at each other. It was as if they knew the trajectory of the bullets before they were shot!

And the room thundered with
relentless blasts of gunshots!

Chapter 15: **Homo Evolutis!**

In Yao Yuan's mind's eye, he could see clearly that he wasn't drastically faster than usual. Granted, his speed was greater than your everyday man's, but that didn't explain the ease with which he could avoid Chou's bullets. It also wasn't due to a sudden improvement of his reflexes or acquiring a new ability where he could predict the bullets' trajectory. Of course, all these were given a minor boost in an adrenaline-filled gunfight, but it wasn't boosted to a superhuman level.

What did help though was a newly acquired ability which allowed him to psychically envision malice projections. Whenever a bullet was fired, he could sense a coagulation of malice forming at its target location. It was in this way that he could tell beforehand where the bullets would land, and thanks to that millisecond of foresight, he could evade incoming danger accordingly.

This new instinct of his was so strong that he could even tell where his opponent intended to

move before he actually moved. And so he aimed at where he felt Chou was going to move next instead of where Chou actually was. He had never experienced anything like this before, but it was incredibly instinctual. It surprised even himself that he could dodge every bullet and stop the enemy short in his step.

This didn't mean that he had the natural upper hand though because it appeared that Ning Bo Tao, or Chou, had mastered the same skill. As Yao Yuan weaved through the volley of bullets, so did Chou.

After a few minutes of this back-and-forth dance, both men had emptied their cartridges without a single slug ending up in the opponent's body. Without pulling their triggers again, they both somehow knew that their guns had emptied, so they flung them off for hand-to-hand combat. The sounds of bones on bones and muscles on muscles were so loud that Zhang Heng had to cover his ears.

Before long, the fight was fast approaching its premature conclusion. A projected

simulation inaccessible to Zhang Heng had occurred between the two brawling men, and it showed that after a few more clashes, Yao Yuan's greater skill at close-quarters combat would prevail. The visage was so authentic that both men had to give it validity.

Perhaps dampened by the vision or maybe he had truly reached the end of his limits, Chou's attempts at evasion became attempts at blocking. Weirdly enough, at one point, as he got further cornered, he started laughing and said, "Your Killer's Arms has gotten better

since the last time I tasted it! But unfortunately..." He let his guard down and allowed one of Yao Yuan's punches to land. Reigning in the punch's blowback, he somersaulted onto the floor. At that instant, the room's door was kicked out and Chou's men rushed in. They immediately lifted their assault rifles and were ready to unload them all across the room. However, Yao Yuan was somehow faster; even before the door had landed on the ground, he had rushed towards the opening.

Before any of the triggers were

pulled, Yao Yuan had already sidled up to the foremost man. Without giving him any chance to react, Yao Yuan unleashed a punch on his stomach. As the force sent him folding upon himself, Yao Yuan elbowed his back and the man crumbled as his vertebrae snapped.

The whole process happened so fast that when the rest of Chou's men registered the sound of bones cracking, their fingers were still on the triggers.

Within the next second, Yao

Yuan kicked the fallen man into the air. As shells were being unloaded, Yao Yuan grabbed hold of the man's body and used it as a human shield. The unexpected rabid convulsion of their mate's body made Chou's men hesitate momentarily.

As they dropped their weapons, Yao Yuan could no longer feel any projected malice, and that bade him into action. Dropping the bullet-riddled body, he rushed into the group of stunned men.

The result was to be expected. Yao Yuan's combat style was neither military boxing, which was common to trained men, nor special ops' grappling techniques, nor Chinese Wushu; it was a unique fighting style tailored to his height, ease of movement, and appendages' length. Yao Yuan spent eight years honing this art of killing which he dubbed the Killer's Arms. It was somewhat similar to [Jeet Kune Do](#); both styles using the smallest effort and shortest time to achieve lethality.

With lightning speed, he

collapsed the trachea of one man before letting loose a flying roundhouse kick that caved in another's temple and one other's neck. And with that, all of Chou's reinforcements had been vanquished.

It has to be said that Yao Yuan's airborne roundhouse kick wasn't for show. He was in the middle of dropping his heel on the last man, but right then, he sensed projected malice in the form of flying knives sailing towards him. Out of options, he added lifting propulsion to his kick in the hopes of avoiding the knives by using the momentum

of air twirls.

However, no matter how fast his instincts were, his body couldn't catch up with the speed of the darting knives. As he landed, two knives were jammed into his left torso, but because he was hit in a mid-air spin, the angle of entry was slanted, so they missed his vital organs by a bit.

The knife on his right bicep though, that was unfortunately possibly fatal.

This was how it was between highly-skilled experts; one small distraction could prove fatal. Chou started laughing maniacally as he leaped towards Yao Yuan, hoping to land the final blow.

Seeing this, fear clogged Zhang Heng's heart. He knew fully well that after Chou kills Yao Yuan, he will have outlived his use. He had serious doubts that Chou would be as kind to him as Yao Yuan once was.

Even if he were to miraculously

survive this, he would be a sitting duck. The control code to initiate warp was in the hands of the Black Star Unit, who had found Noah Two. If Yao Yuan were to die, the rest of the Black Stars would be blown into smithereens, and the remaining 100,000 people would be left on death panel...

In an unexpected twist, Zhang Heng saw Yao Yuan step on the hand of the body beside him and the rut-tut-tut of an assault rifle rang out. The man Yao Yuan stepped on still had his fingers entwined over his weapon's trigger, so as Yao Yuan applied

pressure, the pistol shot out a series of bullets aimed at Chou!

Chou could sense the projected malice, but since it didn't come directly from Yao Yuan, he misjudged the trajectory the bullets would take. He tried swerving out of the way, but as he landed by the wall, the lower part of his body was already riddled with holes.

As Chou slumped in his pooling blood, his facial expression was not one of fear or sorrow as one would expect, but rather he

looked relieved. Between gasps of air, he croaked, "Yao Yuan, did you purposely let yourself be hit to lure me to charge towards you?"

Yao Yuan shook his head as he walked solemnly towards Chou, "No, that was indeed unavoidable. But somehow, as I landed, I felt like this plan would be able to spell your death."

After hearing that, Chou started laughing even harder. "Looks like even fate wants me

dead. When I was still in the Black Star Unit, you were always just a little bit better than me, be it bravery, resourcefulness, combat skills, or leadership... When we were on the space station, you told me how small you felt when you looked at the immense nothingness around us. I didn't tell you at the time, but I totally agree with you; I felt swept by a sensation of anxiety, emptiness, and loneliness when we were in space... It was unsettling, but it also gave me this ability which had me overjoyed because I'll finally had something that could help me overtake you... Alas, it's a trick of fate after all, huh? In the end, I'll never outrun your shadow...

But seeing you with this power did help me confirm the hypothesis that this power comes with man's extended habituation in space. Perhaps it evolved out of man's need to feel empowered against the nothingness of space... And so, as your spaceship continues on in space, you'll probably have more people like us on your hands... But that concerns me no more... Lan... How I've missed you, but don't worry... I'm coming..."

Chou's breath gradually slowed

until his spirit returned to nothingness.

Yao Yuan looked somberly at his former squad member and a few moments later, he retrieved Chou's dog-tag from his body and slipped it into his uniform. Then he stood up and addressed Zhang Heng. "Can you still move?"

This gathered Zhang Heng's scattered senses. He sprang up and replied, "Yes, sir. I have no problems moving, but quick, inform Captain Wong that the

building they're in is full of explosives!"

This information startled Yao Yuan, but when he spotted the shattered remote at the corner of the room, he breathed a sigh of relief. "That's alright, now. Without the remote, the bombs won't go off so easily. Ning Bo Tao was a top secret agent; he wouldn't set the bombs at places where they would be accidentally hit by stray bullets... So let's get moving. We're leaving earth by six. And have you found your father?"

The question brought tears to Zhang Heng's eyes. Shaking his head, he answered, "He's been found dead..."

Yao Yuan moved forth to corner Zhang Heng into a hug. "My condolences... But now you have to carry on on his behalf. He would want you to do that. Now, let's meet up with Ol' Wong' and then we'll depart for the spaceship."

Just before Zhang Heng was made to follow, he caught himself and yelped, "Yao Yuan,

wait a minute. I have a request to ask of you... There are some womenfolk in this station that were gathered by Chou's troops. They are truly helpless. Can't we bring them along? There are only a hundred of them, that isn't really a huge number. They're nice people; in the three days I was captured, three of the girls came over to nurse me to health. They gave me water and changed my bandages. One of them is called Bai Ning Xue, another Luo Mao Miao and the last one, whose surname I didn't catch, was called Bo Li. Please, I beg of you to bring them along! I'm willing to trade my rank for their places on board."

Yao Yuan stared intently at Zhang Heng for quite some time. As he turned to leave, he said, "This is the last time I will hear of such a request again! You're a military man now; your rank represents your honor, your life! Do not treat it so lightly! I will not hear of something like this again! So do not let me down..."

But I'll remind you that the hovercraft will leave in another ten minutes. Until then, anyone that fits our screening criteria is allowed onboard..."

A term used to describe the next stage of human evolution after homo sapiens by futurist Juan Enriquez.

Martial art philosophy favored by Bruce Lee. Unlike other martial arts, Jeet Kune Do or JKD values usefulness in everyday life.

Chapter 16: That Swath of Blue...Adieu! Home sweet home!

Zhang Heng was immediately glad after hearing Yao Yuan's response, but before he could express his gratitude, Yao Yuan had vanished down the halls to vanquish the rebels remaining in the station. Wasting no more time, Zhang Heng also departed for his destination.

After a short jog, he reached the rooftop where a few young women were on guard. Based on

their haggard appearances and tattered clothes as well as a noticeable lack of armaments, they looked more like they were forced onto patrol duty rather than having the actual willingness to stand guard. The fact was that the women secured there were all ladies in their prime. The dangers that they had to protect themselves from originated from within the same building more often than from outside.

When they saw Zhang Heng, they were shocked but not scared, because they all knew of him. After Zhang Heng was

taken in by Chou's men, he was locked together with these women and three of them took turns remedying him. The reality was that they too were curious as to why a man was imprisoned along with them. So, during Zhang Heng's period of convalescence, they had formed a strong bond.

Upon seeing Zhang Heng again while sounds of gunfire reverberated through the building, they couldn't help but feel a surge of hope.

Giving voice to their greatest hope, Zhang Heng shouted, "The army is here to escort us off! Get ready to move. They will only wait ten minutes for us, so pack light; take only important stuff like photographs or jewelry! Tell everyone to get ready. I repeat, we only have ten minutes!"

The girls were stunned for a brief second before hollering out in joy. They immediately rushed to the rooftop loft to spread the news among their fellow friends in captivity. It didn't take long for the staircase to get filled with throngs of women rushing down.

Zhang Heng made the decision to not follow the crowd down. After the incident in the interrogation room, he felt like he understood Yao Yuan more. As long as he was not atrociously later than the designated ten minutes, he knew Yao Yuan would be willing to wait for him. And so he stayed behind to give the girls a slightly larger window of time to get on the hovercraft.

As people streamed out of the loft, Zhang Heng went against the current into it. Inside he saw that some of the women were

still changing, putting on what was left of their Sunday's best. Because it was inappropriate to linger, he turned into a side room where he was originally detained. As he suspected, three women were sitting in it.

One of them had her hair dyed in a shimmering gold color. This woman of porcelain skin had in her arms a girl of fifteen or sixteen. This girl with ink-black locks was visibly shaken; her eyes darted nervously around the room. Cradled within the woman's embrace, she had the appearance of a frightened cat.

The last remaining woman was reclining at the far corner of the room, listlessly watching the world outside the window beside her. Even when Zhang Heng barged in, she gave no sign of response, lost in her own world as she was.

This scene that would have struck other people as weird was of no surprise to Zhang Heng. After three days of close proximity, he was already quite familiar with their peculiarities. The beauty with alabaster skin was Bai Ning Xue and the girl in

her arms was Luo Mao Miao. The two weren't related by blood, but the riot seemed to have pulled the two into a sisterly bond. For as long as Zhang Heng had known them, Ning Xue had always resided over Mao Miao as the protective big sister.

The other woman went by the name of Bo Li and she had always been somewhat of a mystery. In the three days they had known each other, she had shown herself to be incredibly taciturn. A bookworm, she preferred her own company and exuded a degree of sluggishness

between actions.

As Zhang Heng ran into the room, he shouted at them, "Quick, follow me. The rebels have been taken care of; it was the work of an official army. We have ten minutes to join them and leave this godforsaken place!"

Ning Xue and Mao Miao were delightfully shocked by the news. As they exchanged a glance, they let out a short cheer. They then moved towards the corner of the room where

most of their stuff was laid out and started packing. Alarmed by their tardiness, Zhang Heng yanked them along. "Didn't you two hear me? We only have ten minutes; there's no time for packing. Plus, we're leaving by hovercraft; there is a weight limit! Now is not the time to act leisurely! And Bo Li, don't just sit there, move! Hurry, only bring your most valuables, and leave the rest!"

Ning Xue and Mao Miao were more than a bit disheartened to have to leave most of their belongings behind, but after a minute of deliberation, they

took off towards the exit with only their wallets, a few pictures, and some small accessories. In contrast to the pair's urgency, Bo Li slowly lifted herself up from her seated position and without pausing to grab anything else, she sauntered towards the door.

This bemused Zhang Heng. As Bo Li passed him, he took hold of her hand. "Don't you want to bring anything along? Don't worry about the time; of the ten minutes, there's about seven left. There's still time for you to quickly grab something."

Bo Li slowly turned to stare at Zhang Heng and shook her head. "No, there's nothing left worth taking..." And with that, she wriggled out of Zhang Heng's grip and melted into the moving crowd.

On the outside of the police station, Yao Yuan was trying to catch his breath at the bottom of the stairs. He had just cleared the whole station. With what Chou described as humans' next form of evolution, he managed the feat without sustaining a single scratch. But as the heat of

the moment wore off, the lethargy seemed to catch up with him all at once, almost knocking him off his feet. What wouldn't he do to just lie down and rest; he was so exhausted that he could barely keep his eyelids open.

With pure mind over matter, he powered on. As he sat recharging himself by the stairs, not far away, the hovercraft that had brought him here landed. Out of it poured twenty fully equipped soldiers who quickly assembled themselves before Yao Yuan. As they stood at the ready, one of them roared, "Unit

twenty-one, reporting for duty,
Major!"

Against an overwhelming exhaustion, Yao Yuan pulled himself up using the wall and said, "Make contact with Lieutenant Wong next door and tell him to lead everyone to vacate the area. The enemies have been neutralized and the hostage has been saved. Also, tell him to figure out a way to accommodate over a hundred female refugees. Remember to screen them accordingly... We might not have the time to do that anymore, so just skip that step and make sure to get them

on the hovercraft, but do register their names and other relevant details. And this operation has been ceded to Lieutenant Wong, so from now on, heed his orders."

"Sir, yes, sir!" saluted the unit leader. After that, other than a field medic that stayed to attend to Yao Yuan, the rest of the nineteen soldiers separated into two groups. One went to the police station and another to the building next door.

By then, the fatigue Yao Yuan

had been holding in bubbled over and he slipped out of consciousness.

When he woke up next, he found himself on top of a simple bed surrounded by the hovercraft's metallic enclosure. By his bed were the rest of the Black Stars and Zhang Heng.

As he sat up, a splinter of pain reminded him of his knife wounds, and out of the corner of his eye, he saw that those had all been given treatment and were bandaged. Without missing a

beat, he launched into his inquiries. "What time is it? How are those women?"

When Yao Yuan woke up, obvious relief was written all over the members of the Black Star Unit. Guang Zhen reassured him, "They are all onboard. The hovercraft fleet has more than enough room to accommodate their number. The time is now four twenty in the afternoon and we're already in America. There's still a ten-minute journey to reach our base, so we will be able to catch the six o'clock departure time with no problem."

Relief swept over Yao Yuan. As he leaned back down, he was pierced with pain emanating from his wounded left arm.

"Was it... Ning Bo Tao? After I was briefed of your arrival, I inspected the structure and found many hidden explosives. Based on the way they were placed and wired, I had a feeling he was behind this."

After a brief silence, Yao Yuan confirmed Guang Zhen's speculation with a nod before

adding, "Yes, you're correct, it was him... But this time, I made sure he was truly dead."

Sighing, Guang Zhen replied, "That's a relief I suppose... Are you feeling alright? You have been in coma for more than seven hours. Xiao Bai has been checking up on you, but he said he found no incriminating wounds..."

Without hesitation, Yao Yuan confessed, "It was due to something else; something I thought was mere coincidence,

but now I can confirm that it has to do with man's heightened state, or rather, evolution... After we leave earth, I'll explain the rest in detail, but if this turns out to be true, then the issue of military deficiency that has been troubling us will be solved."

The spaceship will end up accommodating 120000 residents and so, with only one thousand and five hundred military men, the issue of military deficiency was troublingly real.

Furthermore, they needed a greater military power to ward against dangerous contingencies that could happen in space. Yao Yuan's encryption expert had said it himself; it was foolish to envision outer space to be a peaceful place. If the military was to fall, who would defend the ship? The citizens? The scientists? They wouldn't be of much help, and that would be a giant waste of their expertise.

The obvious solution was military expansion, and Yao Yuan had indeed given it some thought. However, power corrupts. During the initial riot,

the first to turn against the civilians were mostly armed forces. To have found a troop of one thousand and five hundred was already an impressive feat to begin with. Try as he might, Yao Yuan couldn't find any extra eligible candidates to be recruited.

However, if Chou's hypothesis was true and there was a chance that elongated habituation in space would incite man's evolution, if provided with necessary training, their lack of numbers could easily be compensated by an increase in skill.

The rest of the journey continued in silence. As the hovercraft neared the base, they veered towards a secluded entrance by the valley's side and directly proceeded into the underground base. Inside, three thousand technical workers, nine hundred academics, and the families of the one thousand and five hundred military men and women had already boarded Noah Two. They had set up residences according to previously allocated districts. These were the workshops for technicians, academies for scientists, and barracks for the military and their families.

The military had quarantined the area around Noah Two. Armed to the teeth with siege weaponry, they looked ready to defend the ship to their deaths.

As Yao Yuan and his team entered the base, orders were issued to allow passage for the remaining civilians to board. Arrangements had already been made according to nationalities, languages, and so on to enable a smooth and systematic boarding.

Even though the most spacious trucks were being used to facilitate transport, the emigration of 120000 people still took up to almost a full hour.

Most of the citizens were seeing Noah Two for the first time. The initial shock was hard to suppress. There were even some outbreaks of excitement, but those were quickly stamped out by attending officers. Twelve lanes were opened to expedite overall movement. To prevent misidentification, everyone was required to swipe their keycards on the designated panels to gain entry.

With all these measures in place, it still took them until 8 P.M, two hours past the intended 6 P.M, to have everyone onboard.

With a size of 120000, there was expected chaos. The originally spacious spaceship appeared even slightly cramped. Furthermore, since Noah Two was originally intended for 100000 people, there weren't enough sleeping bunkers. Technicians, soldiers, and scientists were given their own sleeping chambers, but it was

impossible to provide similar privilege to the remaining civilians. The issue was that after the specialized districts had been cordoned off, there still remained quite a number of sleeping chambers but not enough to fit everyone. A difference in access to privileges between specialized members of the community and the normal public was manageable and even encouraged because it inspired self-improvement among the public. However, a difference in treatment among the same echelon of normal civilians would prove to be tumultuous.

Hence, Yao Yuan made the decision to break down the partitions outside of the previously mentioned designated districts. Living arrangements would still be assigned according to tents and camps like how it was in the valley.

As everyone settled into place, Yao Yuan and the rest of the Black Star Unit were congregating at central command.

"Open the exit chute!"

"Captain's order, open the exit chute!"

"Opening the exit chute!"

Gradually, the metal layer above Noah Two started to open itself. This had been given multiple test runs, so this part of the operation proceeded without a hitch. After a few minutes, an aperture large enough to allow passage of Noah Two opened above the base.

"Initiate Noah Two's anti-gravitational system. Going into ten-second countdown!"

"Captain's order, Initiate Noah Two's anti-gravitational system. Going into ten-second countdown!"

"Ten, Nine, Eight, Seven..."

As the seconds ticked down, the three sites of gravity manipulators around the base started to charge, and after an initial jolt, Noah Two began to

achieve levitation. Within these few seconds, even though they couldn't see outside the ship, everyone onboard collectively held their breaths because this was the moment that would decide their fate.

Noah Two's levitation started to accelerate and it began to float into the sky. Before long, it had pushed itself beyond the clouds. It wasn't until they reached the ozone layer that Noah Two began to slow against the resisting pressure.

"Initiate energy pulse system.
Accelerate speed!"

"Captain's order, initiate energy
pulse system. Accelerate speed!"

"Initiating energy pulse system.
Total discharge increase by point
zero two three. Energy discharge
is on standard operation!"

As Noah Two lifted beyond the
ozone layer, everyone in central
command was gifted with a
grand view of Earth through the
reinforced glass windshield.

Amidst the engulfing darkness of space, the azure planet shone like a sapphire in the dark, its glittering beauty taking everyone's breaths away...

Behind the feeling of amazement, there was an undercurrent of deep melancholy. Zhang Heng was caught wiping a few stray tears with his sleeve.

"Initiate preparation for space warp. Thirty seconds for energy calibration. Check load output for standard value!"

"Captain's orders, initiate preparation for space warp, thirty seconds for energy calibration, check load output for standard value!"

"Initiating preparations for space warp. Calibrating energy. Load output confirmed at standard value, peaked at 93.23 percent of total output. All energy channels working as intended, slight discharge variation at third energy pool..."

Yao Yuan turned to take one

good last look at that swath of blue. His heart was roiling with mixed emotions...

Adieu! Our home sweet home!

"Initiate... Space warp..."

Chapter 17: The First Warp

Man's understanding of space warp technology was currently still minimal, or to be exact, approaching nil.

The capability to move from one physical location to the next without traversing the distance in between nor the passage of time bordered on science fiction for human technology of the time. And yet, it had come into reality in the year 2027.

Nevertheless, it was not only the technology of space warping that man of the time was unfamiliar with; outer space itself was a grand mystery to man. In the year 2027, man was just beginning to explore the worlds beyond their world. Everything about the mysterious expanse beyond Earth itself was stuff of speculation and myths. With the scientific advancement of the time, man had only managed to step foot upon the moon; we had not even reached Mars. For every thing man knew about space travel, there was much more that was still unknown.

However, it was supremely clear that space travel was where technology was headed. Due to low mortality rate and dwindling natural resources, space emigration was the next logical step.

That was why when the technology of space warping landed in human hands, immediate efforts were taken to understanding it and essentially making it work. The creation of Noah One and Two was a result of technological paroxysm that came with that discovery.

Yet... it has to be said that in the year 2027 there still existed some distance between man and actual space habitation. Even though man could put space warping into application, the theories behind it were still a source of befuddlement to man's brightest minds. It was akin to how man's ancestral hominidae would handle a gun. He could somehow figure out it that launches fatal projectiles, but the actual science involved would be lost upon him.

According to scientists' understanding at the time, the most possible way to displace an

object across space would be through the usage of wormholes. It was speculated that through the creation of stargates, items could be transported through a wormhole from one of its ends to appear out of its other in no time. Of course, this was mere hypothesis; man didn't have the technology at the time to put this into experimentation or practice.

However, the technology of space warp was principally unique; it was closer to direct teleportation than talks of wormholes. It completely

undermined man's understanding of basic physics, because essentially you are traveling faster than light, and that was a physical impossibility.

It should have been a huge honor for Yao Yuan's crew and the 120000 people onboard Noah Two, because just like the ape with a gun, they were the first ones to have used a technology that was billions of years ahead of their time... but most impressively, they all survived the ordeal.

For such a historically momentous moment though, most of the people onboard couldn't feel anything that was particularly different during the warp. Other than those who could see outside the spaceship, most had no idea warping had begun and finished. In fact, after it was over, many were still in pre-warp anxiety. The fact was that space warping was an affair that elapsed in no time; it was not uncommon for most to not have noticed it, because the whole process had taken literally no time.

Looking outside the

windshield, Yao Yuan could no longer spot earth's blue and green. It was obvious that they were no longer within the solar system. The warp was a huge success with minimal complications.

After Yao Yuan breathed a sigh of relief, he communicated, through the ship's intercom, "Attention all ship crew: begin check up on all ship parts. Law enforcers, begin patrol; check for possible casualties encountered in the warp and spread the news of warp's success... Remove the ship's protective carapace; we need the

people to see for themselves the success of the warp to calm their fears."

Due to his previous training on the space station, Yao Yuan was highly tuned to man's needs for stability in space. On earth, that would come from the feeling of solid ground under one's feet. However, now that they were in space, the difference between life and death was separated by a metallic carapace. It would be much harder to muster the same feeling of stability. To prevent fits of a nervous breakdown, Yao Yuan knew that he had to give the people onboard any and all

assurance he could. They were all essentially trapped in an enclosed space, so even a small mutiny could be highly problematic.

This was also the reason why Yao Yuan was adamant to bring more than the recommended 100000 people. There was a physical comfort to being in crowds. The bigger the crowd, the stronger the support one could feel. One could see this reflected in places of mass disasters. People usually thronged together after they had reached safety to seek communal support and comfort.

This was also why he had condemned the powerful officials that had left in small-sized spacecrafts, because with such a small size, their morale and consequently their chances of survival would be greatly compromised.

Noah Two bustled with activity after Yao Yuan issued his orders. Of the one thousand five hundred soldiers, six hundred of them had been previously assigned to sixty patrol units. They started patrolling according to their designated routes on electromobiles that were fitted alongside the ship's

inner rails. The civilians too had heard Yao Yuan's announcement through the ship's communication system, so the patrols went smoothly.

"Captain, the different departments are sending back their initial reports."

After a beep, a blueprint of Noah Two appeared on the screen before them. The ship's body was overlaid with about fifteen red-colored lines.

"Captain, on screen are the energy channels that suffered damages during warp. Of them, channels six, twelve, and thirty-one have received the most damage. Beyond that, the department of energy reported that everything else appears to be working as normal."

"Reports from the patrols stated that other than a few fainting spells that occurred due to overexcitement, there were no serious cases of injury. Everyone's accounted for."

"Reports from the quartermasters stated that all of the stockpiles are accounted for. No further complications..."

The string of reports continued for about ten minutes. Only after every department had reported a lack of incidents did Yao Yuan breathe a sigh of relief. He then ordered, "Dispatch the maintenance crew to begin repairs and maintenance. If there is a need to conduct repairs on the outer part of the spaceship, follow the necessary protocol. Liaise with the security committee before attempting to leave the spaceship."

"Central communication, connect me to the surveillance committee. Find out our exact location. Triangulate that using our surrounding constellations and star locations. Check for whether we're still in the Milky Way and whether there's a planet nearby."

"Then connect me back to the department of energy. I want a detailed report on the energy expenditure during warp, and calculate from that how many warps we could still attempt. Also, I need a report on our daily

energy expenditure as well."

As Yao Yuan concluded, he turned to realize that the rest of Black Stars had their heads turned towards the room's left side window. Their attention seemed to be heavily attracted to what was beyond it.

Yao Yuan followed their line of sight and saw that against the pitch blackness of space was a softly glistening star. Through the distance, it shone in a twinkling luminescence.

What was truly attention-grabbing though was not the star itself but rather an interstellar entity that was a bit further away. Close enough to be visible to the naked eye, it glowed in an earthy yellow.

A planet!

Needless to say, it was to everyone's astonishment that the warp's randomized drop would place the spaceship in a location where a planet was temptingly within reach!

Chapter 18: Planet Ho!

The cosmos, as per its definition, is an infinite expanse. To equate it with the Milky Way, which quite a number of people aboard Noah Two still did, once again showcased how little the general public at the time knew about space travel. Because the Milky Way, no matter how incomprehensibly big it is, is still infinitely small when taken in comparison with the boundless cosmos.

Therefore, to have the Noah Two's first warp land near a

galaxy that housed a planet had such a low probability that it was numerically impossible to explicate!

This simple observation was clear to Yao Yuan's crew, the many scientists, and even most of the citizens onboard. Even without a deep understanding of space-warping technology and space traveling, the straightforward fact that space warping was a dangerous ordeal was lost on no one.

Unbeknownst to everyone

outside of the close circle of Black Star members as well as the scientists that did the calculations, the department of energy's initial calibration allowed Noah Two three chances at warping before they ran out of energy. This was a closely guarded piece of information. Not even Zhang Heng knew of this, because they were afraid of the news sending waves of dissent and despair across the masses.

How else would the public react to knowing they only had three chances, three chances that were each infinitesimally small to

succeed?! They knew it was dangerous, but they didn't need to realize that it was actually also hopeless.

Nevertheless, perhaps it was the collective prayers of everyone aboard Noah Two that had touched the gods, because somehow, inexplicably, luck had smiled upon them!

Even Yao Yuan couldn't remain his usual collected self as he double and triple checked the russet-colored planet before his eyes. He could feel his heart

leaping out of his chest.

He might've even allowed himself to cheer aloud in joy, but before he could do so, the rest of Black Stars, including Zhang Heng, had him beaten to the task. After that, through the intercom, they could hear similar outbursts of glee reverberating across Noah Two. It sounded as if the 120000 people aboard were simultaneously cheering for their good fortune, and that might not even have been that far away from the truth.

A planet meant a chance at landing and subsequently a chance of it being conducive to human survival. Admittedly, the chance was still low overall, but it was already much higher than what they were initially willing to give themselves.

What was supportive of this optimistic diagnosis was the lack of an asteroid belt around the planet. This signified that the gravity of the planet was stable enough to be free from falling meteor strikes and could sustain an atmosphere. This also allowed the expeditionary crew a better chance at landing.

Secondly, even if the surface turned out to be inhospitable for man, what lay at its core could prove invaluable to Noah Two. Based on its size, shape, and color, the planet was most likely a type of [terrestrial planet](#). The chances of it having radioactive materials like uranium underneath its core were statistically high.

Noah Two's store of energy would allow three warps for a number of 120000 passengers. That, however, was a number calculated with Noah Two having three nuclear energy generators. If they could

increase the number of generators and replace most of the inner partitions from their current steel to a lighter aluminum, the amount of warps they could do would dramatically increase. A safe prediction would increase the number of warps to the range of hundreds!

Therefore, even if the planet's atmosphere didn't support human life, it would be fine. The year was already 2030; man had advanced far enough technologically to be able to support extended exposure to alien terrain. In fact, Noah Two

had enough space suits to allow construction of a mining rig on the planet. With newfangled technology like [solarponics](#), Noah Two could technically last for about three to five years mining on the planet. After that, Noah Two would have enough energy supply to conduct more instances of space warp, exponentially increasing their chance at survival.

No matter how one saw it, this planet was a lifesaver!

"Central communications, relay

the order to dispatch all long-distance surveillance devices. Train them all towards that planet closest to us. I want a reading on it in the next twenty-four hours. I need details like its gravity scale, weather patterns, and everything else that's relevant. Also, broadcast across the ship that we've discovered a planet..." said Yao Yuan, into the intercom. Even though he tried to cover it, everyone could hear the smile in his voice and that inadvertently lifted the spirits of everyone onboard.

[Could it be that our prayers were heard? Is there someone

still looking out for us? If that's true... then please don't abandon us; keep humanity's last flame alive!]

One day later...

Jay Wales groggily woke up from his slumber. As he opened his eyes, he was greeted by the light blue color of a tent's underbelly. It took him awhile to register his surrounding, to realize that he was... in space, or rather in a spaceship. From whisperings around him, he found out that after the party

had left earth, the warp had been successful and now everyone was waiting for the captain's next series of orders.

Jay wasn't a scientist nor a technician. In fact, he had not even attended college. He was furthest from what one would call society's elite, for he was really a professional con artist. The Harvard education and multiple doctorates that he had presented to the military were all fabrications.

In a twist of fate, the extra

security he acquired a few years ago in a con job had saved his life. It had helped him again into conning a ticket, a VIP ticket at that, into Noah Two.

Jay readied his bed, put on his clothes and left his tent. He walked right into a bustling crowd, and as the crowd milled around him, Jay couldn't help but give a self-deprecating laugh at the fact that he too now belonged to this bunch of elites.

At that moment, a voice lifted from his side. As Jay turned, he

found an eighteen to nineteen-year-old girl addressing him in a continuous stream of sibilant sentences.

Unfamiliar with any language other than his native English, Jay awkwardly replied, to the girl in her mid-sentence, "Can you speak English?"

Stopped by the sudden request, the girl paused and stared blankly at Jay before resuming, "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought you spoke French. What was your major in university? Never

mind, now is not the time for chit chat. What I was saying was, mister, could I bother you to help me fetch a pail of water? I wanted to give my tent a good scrubbing; it has mud splattered all over it from the rain we had before boarding. I wanted to clean it before that, but the time of boarding was suddenly pushed up, so I haven't gotten the opening to do so."

[This is why I hate foreign languages...]

Jay smiled in reply. "Of course I

am willing to help. But could you tell me, miss, where would I find the nearest washroom? I'll help you bring back the water you need when I come back."

The girl stared back at Jay again with her pair of watery eyes. While he waited for an answer, he couldn't help but notice that the pompous ways this girl carried herself was quite cute.

"Oh, you must have missed the dinner yesterday night. During dinner, everyone was given a

map of the district they were in. Nearby points of interest were all marked on the map. Could it be that you don't read Chinese? Because the map was all in Chinese and it's not attached with a translation. That probably means that the authority's Chinese, huh... Why don't you wait here for a bit while I go get you the map. I translated the Chinese words on it, but it was to French ..."

[Then what use would I have with it?!...]

Out of chivalry and respect, Jay merely smiled, but as soon as the girl turned around, he breathed a sigh of frustration.

Some time later, the girl returned with a piece of paper in her hand. As she walked, she was busy scrawling something on it. When she reached Jay, she handed the paper over and then stretched out her hand.

Jay accepted the map. Based on visual cues and the girl's hasty translation, which was what she was doing as she walked over, he

was able to discern that near their district was a communal bathroom with six shower stalls, four laundry rooms, and further away were two communal canteens, and...

Right then, Jay noticed the girl's still outstretched hand. Confused by it, he asked, "Don't you need me to help you fetch water? I'm going, or is there anything else you need?"

The girl tilted her head and replied, in a serious tone, "What I need is my map back. I've

helped you with the translation, but it's still my map, I need it back. It's because you don't understand foreign languages that I'm helping you here."

Jay was silenced by her unassailable logic and thus could only smile dumbly in return...

[THIS IS WHY I HATE
FOREIGN LANGUAGES!]

There were a total of three water supply depots near them: one for drinkable water and two

for water for everyday usage. Based on memorization, Jay soon found the location for one of the depots for everyday water. When he arrived, the line was already hundreds of people long, but because everyone was part of an educated crowd, there were no petty acts like line cutting or the like. Also, helping with maintenance of discipline were six soldiers on duty. With arrangements as such, the line moved rather quickly.

When it was Jay's turn, he swiped his keycard on the adjacent panel and one of the soldiers handed him a water

bucket and said, "Everyone is given only one bucket, so be careful not to lose it. If there's damage, remember to report to the maintenance committee that will do their rounds every week. Everyone is entitled to two pails of water for everyday use each day, so be economic with your usage. Okay, next."

Just like that, Jay lugged two pails of water back to his camp... This place was a carnival before, but the attractions had all been removed by the logistics committee to make space for an area housing five thousand plus noncommittal tents, and Jay

resided in one of them.

The girl's tent was next to Jay's, and she appeared to be alone and without family. When she saw Jay approaching, she leaped up and ran towards him with a huge smile lighting up her face. As she took over the pails of water, Jay suddenly felt a black curtain dropping before his eyes. Without much warning, he collapsed forward...

He felt a fever burning up within...

As he slipped in and out of consciousness, Jay could viscerally sense the people, the objects, and finally, the spaceship around him melting away as he got jettisoned into space's enveloping darkness...

It was crushingly lonely, desolate, and unsettling...

A type of planet, of which our solar system has four, i) the terrestrial planets, eg. Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars; ii) gas giants, planets composed mostly of hydrogen and helium, eg. Jupiter and Saturn; iii) ice

giants, planets composed mostly of elements heavier than hydrogen and helium, eg. Uranus and Neptune; iv) dwarf planet, eg. Pluto.

A plant cultivation technology using mainly solar energy. The word itself is modeled after hydroponics. It's a combination of the terms, solar for sun, and ponics for plantation.

Chapter 19: Landing project and... Dangers abound! (1)

In the afternoon after the space warp, many scientists from different fields were taking their lunch breaks at one of the communal cafeterias. The topic of the day was undoubtedly regarding discoveries on the new planet.

"...from satellite photos we can see that the planet has an atmosphere, but it doesn't appear to support the formation

of low and mid cloud layers. This lack of heavy cloud layers coincides with our observation that the planet doesn't have any aquatic terrain. Even its polar ends don't seem to carry ice caps. It would appear this planet is similar to Mars, a desert world," said a distinguished-looking old man with silvery head, shuffling captured photos of the planet between bites of braised beef.

Frowning, the man beside him interjected, "That's a wild comparison to make. Yes, the planet appears to have a surface that's as dry as Mars', but after

the photos are enlarged, you can see that the land's completely covered with what appears to be sand. There is a distinct lack of variations in its crust layers; where are the mountains, highlands, or valleys? There is none because the planet seems to be a sea of sand. That, however, is anomalous with the weather pattern findings since the planet is reported to have an overall mild climate, and there are no reports of it having accelerated wind patterns that would cause severe weathering of its surface into a sea of sand that we're witnessing here."

A female scientist from the same table who was enjoying a meal of spaghetti agreed, "Yes, that is indeed very weird. From both geological and meteorological perspectives, this is an impossibility because you would need a constant weathering that lasts at least a few hundred billion years to have everything on a planet's surface reduced to sand particles. We don't have an exact number, but the cosmos is definitely much younger than that. Then again, everything we know about basic physics might be incorrect, so our estimate of the cosmos' age may be way off."

The woman's comments caught the attention of another scientist that was passing her table who stopped and openly jeered at her as he retorted, "Why would our knowledge of basic physics be wrong? They are theories that have been tried and retried for thousands of years! How dare you question the integrity of the school of physics! Could you discredit the validity of gravity? Could you..."

"Alright, alright, Silewei, let's get to our seats. Save your energy for the academic committee discussions. We still have a meeting to catch later at

two," said a fifty-something gentleman who appeared beside Silewei, gently nudging the heated physicist away while looking apologetically at the company present.

"I apologize for my friend here. He's German, so he tends to get a bit too serious about his passion, which in his case is the study of physics. Again, I apologize."

After that, he gave a bow and dragged Silewei away, who was still in the middle of his tirade. "Alan, you yourself know how

people are looking at physics nowadays. The success of space warping has completely undermined its institution. If this continues, the sanctity of our area of science will..."

As the pair drifted off, the remaining scientists shared a few stiff chuckles. The fact was that academic debates such as the one that had just taken place was already commonplace even before the actual space warp. The presence of such advanced technology found in Noah Two had unhinged most of the academics and their lifelong beliefs in the unassailable logic

of scientific inquiry. Faced with a technology that they couldn't logically dissect, there existed a need to convince others to indirectly convince themselves the validity of their own practices.

Therefore, arguments such as these were frequent on Noah Two, although the presence of a German accent in these arguments was indeed a bit too common.

"Let's get back to where we left off," said the female scientist,

hoping to salvage the conversation. "Personally, I believe we need to have an expedient landing on the planet. Only then will we be able to tell why the planet presents such a case of anomaly. It will be such a breakthrough. Just imagine the progress we could make in natural science with the data and knowledge we would gather. Honestly, I cannot wait for the day of landing."

A young scientist beside her chirped, "I'm afraid the authority would not authorize a landing with such haste. They appear to adhere firmly to rules

and protocols. Without much more detailed deliberations, I'm doubtful anyone will land on the planet any time soon. Take the example of district segregation; normal civilians were given no access into the Academy, to which even technical workers and army have to apply for entry. Furthermore, have you seen the community regulations released yesterday? That's a lot of rules to be followed."

"It's better that way!" agreed the older generation of the party in unison, and one of them led in explicating, "The fact that they are strict about rules being

kept means that they have a high desire towards protecting and upholding the inviolability of order. Young'un, let me let you in on a secret: if it weren't for their desire and penchant for order, I wouldn't have agreed to come. In a time like ours... what we truly need is order. As long as things don't devolve into chaos, then that's our greatest blessing."

With that in mind, everyone present started sharing their experiences before they were relocated to the base. The gloom and helplessness seemed like a lifetime ago. It reminded them

of how fortunate they were to have found solace on Noah Two. In an overall mood of thankfulness and contentment, lunch ended and the scientists broke off to their own rooms or designated labs to prepare for the meeting later in the day. It was a meeting to discuss discoveries on the planet.

Time passed and more and more scientists arrived at the conference room. There were meteorologists, geologists, astrophysicists, chemists, and even pathologists. In fact, any member of the Academy that could contribute to the

understanding of the planet were invited to attend. In the end, the conference room was filled to the brim with the attendance of about two hundred people.

As the clock struck two, a small unit of army agents appeared at the entrance, each of their uniform lapels adorned with a black star-shaped pin. These were agents handpicked by Yao Yuan from the one thousand and five hundred army members. Most of them were special ops members before Earth's governmental system collapsed. This troop of about eighty in

number was specially built to ensure that the scientists and also Zhang Heng were protected as they were important members of Noah Two who were unable to protect themselves.

The unit instantly proceeded to secure the perimeter of the conference room. A few minutes later, Yao Yuan and Guang Zhen arrived in an electromobile. Because they were men of military and thus unused to decorum at political gatherings, they went directly past the heads of the various scientific committees that had been

waiting for their arrival by the door. Without preamble, Yao Yuan directed them to begin, "Let's get started. We have no time to waste. It is instrumental that we decide today whether it is imperative to proceed with landing. We can't idle in space forever."

Back on earth, the few committee leaders, due to their high social standing, were familiar faces at political functions. They expected a certain degree of decorous reception and so were understandably astonished by the social affront.

However, with sensitivity honed from years of maneuvering social functions, they were quick to realize that they weren't dealing with politicians but soldiers, so they hastily followed in step behind Yao Yuan. Among them was a sixty-something gentleman who approached Yao Yuan and stated, "Major, I wish to request for permission to unpack a tenth of the sealed seeds. We are no longer in the solar system, and since it's a completely different interstellar system, we're dealing with a variation in solar source and light fractals. The changes could cause anomalous

growth during germination. To ensure and increase productivity, I would like to conduct a growth experiment on seeds from various produce using one of the ship's simulated biomes."

Before they left Earth, Yao Yuan had targeted numerous biologists, genetic engineers, agriculturalists, as well as sociologists as priority rescue targets. He needed their expertise to discuss life skills in space, and one of those was space farming.

Noah Two was ten kilometers long and several kilometers wide and was about a hundred meters tall. The ship had six levels, and if each level was packed to the brim, Noah Two could fit 500000 people! However, this was impossible because they needed space for supplies, and with that number, space warping would be unattainable due to the enormous energy required.

Therefore, of the six levels, only the first, second, and third were inhabited by normal civilians. The fourth was the Academy and Workshop while

the fifth was the Barracks. The fifth floor was also housing classified and specialized rooms like a metal forge, munitions and weaponry centers, storage for valuable resources like seedlings and animal genes, as well as e-book libraries. The top level was biomes with artificial soil.

On the sixth level, there was a giant skylight. If Noah Two was in the presence of a blazing star, it could allow light exposure. Through air filtration and gravity manipulation devices, it could support biomes of different types and thus the

farming of produce to sustain about 100000 people was entirely possible. After the biomes had stabilized, they could even facilitate animal husbandry through genetic reconstruction of animals like cattle, hogs, and sheep. These were all measures that had been put into place after suggestions from these experts.

The committee leader's request caught Yao Yuan mid-stride. Yao Yuan took a brief minute to consider his answer before resuming the journey to the podium. While walking, he replied, "One tenth of the total is

too much. We still have no information on the star of this system; it might cause irreparable mutation or damage to the seeds, so the risk is too high... but food is a big issue. We can't rely on frozen food or rations for a prolonged period... Okay, I'll permit you to use five percent of the seeds, and a biome area of corresponding size."

The biologist was instantly gladdened by the news and profusely thanked Yao Yuan by promising to provide a constant report on the seeds' condition. Other committee heads saw how

one of their colleagues had managed to finagle an advantage, and in the spirit of competition, they too wanted to rush ahead to issue Yao Yuan with their own proposals. However, seeing as the podium was already only a few steps away, they had to return disappointedly to their seats.

With Yao Yuan at the podium and Guang Zhen at the front row, Yao Yuan started his speech. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'll be frank. We don't have the luxury of time. Every minute we spend in space, we're spending an enormous amount of

resources to maintain the air and water filtration as well as gravity manipulation systems, so let's get to business. The agenda of this meeting I believe has been delivered beforehand to everyone present...

There's a planet not far from our current location. Based on calculations, it will take a month and five days for Noah Two to reach it. Now, I will open the floor for everyone to debate their findings and hopefully by the end settle on a conclusion...

On whether or not we are
landing on this planet!"

Chapter 20: Landing project and... Dangers abound! (2)

It was the afternoon of the meeting...

And Zhang Heng was noticeably absent. The reality was that other than Yao Yuan and Guang Zhen, the rest of the Black Stars were exempted from attendance. While the meeting was underway, they were at the fifth-floor gymnasium and shooting range training their marksmanship and close combat

skills. Zhang Heng once more was the exception here due to the recent injuries he had suffered. Hence that fateful afternoon, he had his schedule wide open.

It was then too that Zhang Heng realized how much power his title of sergeant carried. He had spent the whole day marveling at the amount of benefits a simple title could confer.

Noah Two had a total of six levels. The civilians were limited

to the lower three levels and their own designated campgrounds. Trespassers and violators would be warned and repeated offenders would be arrested.

Limitation for scientists and technicians were looser; they could technically roam freely between levels one to four, but due to safety measures, whenever they wanted to leave level four, which was the Academy and Workshop, they needed attending guards. And since there were only one thousand and five hundred soldiers available, requests for

descent into the civilian's campgrounds weren't issued and passed often. Things were similar when they had the desire to ascend to the fifth level in that requests were required, though direct access was given if they were members of specialized units that had their laboratories or places of work at that level.

The military was allowed free access to all areas except the sixth floor, which was restricted to only the leading officials of the three districts. Nevertheless, due to a limited number of soldiers, the military normally

was assigned to guard or patrol duty and weren't free to wander around Noah Two.

Zhang Heng, as an extended member of the Black Star Unit, was granted unrestrained access to all areas within Noah Two. Due to his unique position as a relatively non-combative member of the technical community, he was also always accompanied by two selected black-star guards¹ whenever he stepped out of level five, and it certainly didn't hurt that the pair that was assigned to him were two drop dead gorgeous women.

Zhang Heng was secretly gratified by the special treatment, but he wasn't supercilious enough to let his feelings show on his face. As he patrolled the third level residential campgrounds, he was heartened to notice the undercurrent of order that presided over the ostentatious hustle and bustle. The gloom that had initially settled over the Tennessean base had all but dispersed and it had been replaced by a sense of camaraderie and jollity. Even though they were originally from different cultural backgrounds, the people seemed

to slowly settle into the realization that they had entered a new era, a more hopeful era, with their newfound neighbors.

As Zhang Heng made his rounds, he passed by a group that was made up of a few Chinese families. They were discussing the issue of ration portions. They were in agreement that having the ration be portioned out according to body sizes was fair since there were few bulky individuals that survived the ordeal long enough to get on the Noah Two. This prevented unnecessary wastage.

From the way the group members addressed each other, it appeared that they were neighbors since before the world fell apart. Their discussion continued on the topic of rations but it had moved on to the issue of excess. Because the families still had elders and children, they would end up with leftovers almost daily. They were discussing ways to deal with the wastage.

"Maybe the government could release a form of currency," offered a slightly paunchy young

man. "Do hear me out; I'm an economics student. Currently, the ship has about 120000 people; it's a veritable city-state. The rationing system the government is currently adopting could only work short-term. Its issues of wastage and disorganization aside, if this continues long term, the biggest negative impact it will have is its psychological implication. One or two years down the road, this system is bound to breed negligence and exhaustion. Just take a look at the soldiers who have food and water dissemination duties; even though they have a better housing situation on the fifth level, compared to everyone else

on that level, their workload is ridiculous. They have to be on duty twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week. Now everything's still okay because everyone's still in their initial high, but as time passes, this can't be good for their morale."

A nearby middle-aged man who had in one hand his young daughter and in another his wife chipped in. "That is true... We're essentially trapped in space; there's nothing around to threaten us other than the evil in people's hearts, especially those armed forces... We've experienced ourselves how

quickly power corrupts and how easily these people who were supposed to protect us could turn on us... But thankfully, the government of this spaceship has shown themselves to be trustworthy2."

The rest of the group sighed in agreement.

Zhang Heng was incredibly shaken up by what he overheard. Before this, he was merely a guileless teen. Thanks to his father's position as a government official, all he knew

were his women and his electronic toys. He was completely insensitive to the undertows of societal rules and norms. Therefore, the more he listened to this group of people, the more he bought into their agenda that people around him could prove him harm. Unconsciously, he stole a glance at the two guards behind him and they appeared unaffected. They seemed to be busy keeping watch over their surroundings.

This made Zhang Heng even more paranoid, suspicious of their insouciance being a front to mask the fact that they could

understand Mandarin and were plotting some insidious plan to undermine the safety of Noah Two. This paranoia combined with his existing injuries assaulted his sense of wellbeing. Feeling suddenly dwarfed by the surrounding cosmos, feelings of anxiety, consternation, loneliness, and fear flooded his mind.

His vision blurred and before he collapsed under the extreme duress, he felt a sensation of heat surge through his body...

As he faded out of consciousness, he tumbled into a chasm of dread and disquietude.

Back in the conference room, the discussion was well underway.

"From our observations thus far, this planet's surface is an expanding desert terrain. Okay, I can see that a few of the meteorologists are already raring to interject. I know the planet's weather patterns aren't tempestuous enough to support this observation, but I'm not

here to debate that. I'm just relaying a fact..."

The current speaker was the geology academic committee's director. He was a strapping man in his forties who looked more like a boxer than a geologist due to the way he was built. Nevertheless, it was this incongruity that had often impressed others when they realized he held such high regard within the scientific community.

He continued, "As I was saying,

the planet's a giant desert. We were unable to spot any water sources from our telescopes. Weirdly enough, other geological structures like bluffs, ridges, plateaus, and hills were also absent. Furthermore, I would like to add that this condition is not caused by natural desertification. Based on the findings of the astronomical committee that was released this afternoon, it was shown that this planet's age is similar to Earth's. In other words, this means that its timeline's not sufficient enough to support desertification. All of these facts led my committee to come up with a conclusion...

This planet's atmosphere contains corrosive elements that will erode everything that comes into contact with it! That's the only explanation for the degree of dehydration and sandification that we're seeing on its surface! If we are to insist on landing, it will be akin to us willingly jumping into an acid pool! Such foolishness!"

What followed such a shocking announcement were claims of confusion and stupefaction. Amidst the uproars, the man took a silent bow and retreated

from the podium, leaving behind a strepitous conference hall.

Frowning, Yao Yuan turned to the director of the meteorological committee who was scheduled to speak next. However, the female head meteorologist was engaged in a heated consultation with the rest of her committee. It wouldn't be any time soon that she would take the podium. Without a choice, Yao Yuan took to the stage. What he was hoping to do then was at least temporarily palliate the uneasiness and tumult brought

upon by the chief geologist's announcement. Its validity aside, he knew that what Noah Two needed then was a confirmation of hope. They had been surviving on hope for so long that to have it violently extinguished would send a rippling, irreparable, psychological strain throughout the whole of Noah Two...

A successful landing would rekindle much hope for their community! Despite its possible dangers, the landing must proceed! That was his decision!

As Yao Yuan stepped towards the podium, he snuck a look outside the window beside him. The darkness that greeted him sent a chill down his spine...

[Space is such a dangerous place; once man steps out of the protection of the spaceship, he's as vulnerable as he could possibly be... What's truly frightening is that despite its size, the cosmos feels like a soul-crushing cage. It traps one with its infinite size. Since it's infinitely huge, there will never be a way out...]

Right then, a few soldiers dashed into the conference room. Disregarding the curious stares of the scientists, they rushed ahead to Yao Yuan's side where one of them detached to whisper something in Yao Yuan's ear. The scientist nearest to them managed to catch a snippet of the conversation, it sounded like, "...seventy-three people, including twelve black..."

Yao Yuan's facial expression dropped for a few seconds before returning to normal as he was being relayed the report. In a low voice, he issued his orders back to the attending soldier

before waving Guang Zhen over.

Guang Zhen, who was already on alert when the soldiers rushed in, quickly jogged to join Yao Yuan. Lowering his volume, he hissed, "What's happening? You don't look too good. Is there a problem of riot?"

Yao Yuan shook his head. "No, I suspect the ship's exposed to some kind of unknown virus. Every Black Star except you and me are infected and are running high fevers; even Zhang Heng was not spared. I suspect Ning

Bo Tao might have released a biohazard when we were in the police station. Currently, within Noah Two, there are seventy-three people that are running high temperatures. They need to be quarantined immediately. Ol' Wong, now you must..." right then, Yao Yuan saw black ink blots bursting before his eyes. Concentrating his immense focus, he steeled himself through the vertiginous sensation. As the feeling passed, he felt a chilling fear caress his heart, and he hastily continued, "I think I may be infected too. To be safe, quarantine me as well. In the meantime, Ol' Wong, I want you to secure the mili..."

Before he could finish, Yao Yuan felt darkness claim him. As he fell into it, he could hear cries of shock and turmoil erupting around him.

Within the fuzzy darkness, despite still sharing a concrete link to his corporeal body, all Yao Yuan could feel was an eerie desolation overloading his senses...

It was as if his spirit had been plucked out of his body and dropped into an empty void.

After a while though, Yao Yuan could see the darkness that was enveloping him receding as wisps of light started emanating from within his own self. As the area around him brightened, he noticed other effervescent orbs of varying brightnesses floating around his periphery. There were seventy-three orbs in total and he was the brightest and biggest of them all...

Members of the eighty-something unit that Yao Yuan hand-picked. They wear a black-star pin.

The original text was "at least the government's Chinese". Efforts have been made to filter out the nationalist sentiment.

Chapter 21: The Awakening!

Contrary to before, Yao Yuan felt submerged in a pool of tranquility.

He was still completely conscious of the fact that nothing had changed. He was still aware that man was dealing with technology that was at least one thousand years ahead of their time!

Things could have so easily

been catastrophic because his operation had forced man into survival within a space in which man's knowledge had no handle over. After all, their understanding of the cosmos at this time was only elementary, or even juvenile and erroneous. The margin for disaster was disproportionately high and so was its corresponding sense of anxiety.

To borrow an analogy, **imagine an action movie scene where the hero is trapped inside a room where the water level is slowly rising and the hero's only way out is to wait for his teammate**

to come to his rescue. Just imagine the hero's feelings of consternation as the room fills up and his fear regarding when and if help will ever come!

Everyone on the Noah Two was in that water-logged room, but their fear could have been even more intense! At least while the water was rising, there was a moment to make peace with one's eventual drowning, but in space, there was no telling what might be waiting to strike next! And often times, the most fear-inducing thing was the unknown...

Since the plan had started in that shop basement, Yao Yuan had been telling himself to not be afraid. This was something he had repeated time and time again many years ago to her. He would never be afraid again because he was determined to be brave on her behalf...

However, when they were actually in space, as the captain of the Noah Two, having the lives of 120000 people on his shoulders had barely given him any chance to breath. Ever since they had secured the Noah Two,

Yao Yuan had been thrown into a continuous rotation of responsibilities such as conferences with scientists, strategy meetings with military officials, supply allotment discussions, and maintenance to managerial obligations, not to mention maneuvering the barbed situation that was interpersonal relationships. He did all of this while maintaining four hours of daily sleep...

Each of these responsibilities carried a heavy load. Combining all of it, the pressure would have been emotionally and psychologically staggering. If it

were somebody other than Yao Yuan, the individual would have been crushed!

Yao Yuan, despite all odds, endured because 120000 wasn't just a number; it represented his mates, his promises, and his dreams, but most importantly, it represented the last hope for humanity...

From the other Black Stars' perspectives, Yao Yuan was a calm, collected, trustworthy, fair, and acute superior as well as a friend. With him on the

battlefield, every challenge would eventually be overcome... However, what they failed to realize was that at the end of the day, Yao Yuan was a man, a man with his own insecurities and fears, but because he was the face of leadership for 120000 attendees, he had to maintain a persona! A persona that exuded confidence and steadfastness, a sigil for hope and survival!

Therefore, Yao Yuan had to conceal his mounting dread and anxiety to keep them away from the public front. For the sake of humanity, these insecurities would forever remain in his

personal collection for his eyes only...

That was until he found himself floating within that starry landscape made up of seventy-three fluorescent light sources. While he was unable to measure his distance from them, he knew subconsciously that if he were to reach out, they would be within reach...

That proximity though was a gap that, try as he might, Yao Yuan couldn't cross. There wasn't a physical connection,

but the emotional link was strong. Yao Yuan could vicariously feel the emotions that the others were experiencing and he found that the ones most reflected in him were the feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and abandonment.

As the link became more pronounced though, these negative sensations were slowly eroded. While initially each of the stars shone in their own pockets of darkness, they gradually refracted and reflected off of each other until they were finally shining in a dazzling crescendo. Even without verbal

communication, a shared experience was formed and the loneliness was washed away by a torrent of serenity. Yao Yuan felt protected and peaceful like a child in his mother's arms and he was lulled into a deep, restful slumber.

When Yao Yuan awoke, he found himself surrounded by people in hazmat suits, some of them writing on their clipboards. Unhurriedly, Yao Yuan surveyed his surroundings. He was in a small, enclosed room with sparse furnishing which he identified as one of the Noah Two's isolation chambers.

He also realized that all over his body were needles connected to various graphs as well as a drip. He could see that beyond the closed door was a sterilization pathway, but that was as far as he could see. He was unsure whether there were guards beyond it, but he could somehow tell that four black-star guards were on duty there. And from the lack of commotion, it would seem Ol' Wong had the Noah Two under control.

Yao Yuan slowly arose unto a seated position. His sudden

movements shocked the attending agents so much that they jumped back several steps. Yao Yuan regarded them silently. Unloosing his sore body, he asked, "How long has it been since I fainted?"

The initial shock of these hazmat-wearing personnel was quickly crested over by excitement. They frantically talked over each other through the suits' communication channel, and it was only after a few seconds of such frantic exchange that they cooled down and the leading young man reported,

"Major has been unconscious for twenty four hours. Within that timeframe, the authority has been busy applying Major's order for quarantine. So far, three hundred and ninety-two people, including you, Major, have been quarantined, but..." The man hesitated.

Yao Yuan urged, "But what? Has something bad happened? Continue with your report."

After giving it some consideration, the man

resumed, "Because the news of a virus came too suddenly and because of the need to organize a quarantine task force, we were seriously understaffed. Therefore, Lieutenant Wong had to issue martial law. Diagnostic outposts have been erected within the more populated areas, meaning the lowest three levels and the residential campgrounds, for the past two days. The increased security and precautions have people worried."

Hearing that, Yao Yuan felt like a load had been taken off. The situation was much better than

he anticipated. It was, in his mind, probably the best possible outcome.

The issuing of martial law and general apprehension were acceptable; those could be rectified if given some effort and time. What he was afraid of was a riot because they weren't on earth, they were inside a spaceship, a highly pressurized and volatile enclosure. If there were riots, and especially army instigated riots, things would have easily spiraled out of control. No one would be able to contain the destruction. Therefore, everything was

indeed better than expected!

"And how is my body's condition? Has there been a diagnosis on the contagion?" asked Yao Yuan.

Flipping through his clipboard, the man answered, "Of the three hundred and ninety-two people who were quarantined, forty-three were fatal. The rest are still in coma. Major is the first one to have awakened. And so, with Major's permission, we would like to conduct more tests on your body, but regarding the

contagion... that's the weird part. We are unable to locate one. From tests conducted on all the patients, none of them had or carried any unknown virus. The reports all state that they are in fit physical condition. There is no explanation as to why they are in a feverish coma. All of the medicine that was issued appeared to have no noticeable effect. I'm sorry to report this, but Major, we were unable to identify any pathogen."

After that, the man gave Yao Yuan a deep bow. This familiar posture made Yao Yuan's

grimace turn into a frown, but the frown lasted only a moment; before anyone had noticed it, it was gone.

"Your report was incredibly detailed. Are you the director for the pathology committee?" Yao Yuan asked casually.

The man deferentially replied, "I'm Mitsuda Saburo, and I am indeed the lead pathologist. But this ordeal has been ignominious; I have failed to identify the pathogen and to issue the necessary treatment.

After this operation is over, I'll voluntarily hand in my resignation because I've failed as the director of this committee."

A lot of things passed through Yao Yuan's mind right then. Although he had issued the order to select Asians to form the majority of Noah Two's civilian base, to be fair, he had not limited it to only Chinese. They had also included the Japanese and Koreans. The fact that the three countries these nationals were from were also the most advanced Asian countries was a lucky happenstance and an easy

excuse for him to skim over survivors from countries like India and Indonesia, whose citizens couldn't provide an equal level of sophistication and refinement.

Other than important committees like the committee of astrophysics, physics, chemistry, and biology, whose directors were handpicked by Yao Yuan, the leaders for the rest of the committees were nominated and selected by each respective group. Yao Yuan already had so many responsibilities in his hands that he didn't have the time to delve

into such politics. In any case, the directors of these committees had to have track records that would be convincing enough to satisfy the rest of their colleagues. That was why Yao Yuan didn't expect this Japanese man before him to actually be the lead pathologist. He didn't foresee that the arrogant Caucasian pathologists would be willing to swallow their pride to appoint a Japanese leader. To be able to force them to do just that, this Japanese pathologist must have been mighty impressive at his work.

"That is unnecessary. You can

remain as the director since none of the other pathologists could find the contagion either. It's not fair to let you alone shoulder the responsibility." Mid speech, Yao Yuan moved into a more comfortable position. "Okay, now your team can start with the body tests, and remember to conduct a biochemical analysis as well. Also, could you contact Lieutenant Wong? Tell him, I need to speak with him."

While one of the team members left to grab Guang Zhen, the rest carried on with their tests. After a few minutes, Guang Zhen's

voice came through the room's intercom. "Ol' Cap'n... I mean, Major Yao Yuan. Wong Guang Zhen standing at duty!"

While he kept his body still for the pathologists to do their job, Yao Yuan replied, "Lieutenant Wong, until I'm released from quarantine, you will continue as acting captain. And I have three orders: first, terminate the martial law as it's no longer necessary; second, connect me to central communications for I wish to address the whole of Noah Two after the tests in here are completed; third, order all navigation departments to chart

the way toward that planet but move at a speed with the lowest possible energy consumption..."

"That's all, over."

The original analogy was a man trapped inside a room thrown into a lava pit. The anxiety coming from the unknowable moment the walls will be melted by lava. I did the change because I don't think any known material on earth that could be constructed into a room could be thrown into lava and survive more than 1 minute. Swapping it retains the original meaning,

but personally I think this is more logical.

Chapter 22:

STABILIZATION AND... THE LANDING PARTY!

Yao Yuan's physical exam ended quickly, but it would still be some time before he could get the results. In the meantime, the full-ship broadcast that he requested had been prepared.

After a few repeated rehearsals of his main points, he leaned forward towards the communication device they had given him and said, in clear English, "Good afternoon, this is

Major Yao Yuan, the captain of this ship.

I'm so sorry, but everyone must have been incredibly worried for the past two days. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude, yes, gratitude, not an apology. To be clear, an emergency incident occurred in the past two days: a sudden outbreak of fever and fainting. We suspected a biohazard attack and hence acting captain Wong issued martial law.

It might have been too harsh or

rash, but it's our responsibility as captains to keep everyone on board safe. Without quarantine and martial law, the virus could have easily spread and befallen even more people. And hence, I do not feel that Lieutenant Wong or myself owe anyone an apology for that.

What we do owe everyone though is a thank you because the emergency quarantine and martial law couldn't have been so successfully implemented without cooperation from everyone. This inhibition must have obstructed personal conveniences, and for everyone's

willingness to bear with that, I would like to once again express my immense gratitude."

Yao Yuan took some pause to review his thoughts and continued, "Indeed, you have not heard wrongly; the martial law was issued by the acting captain because I am also one of the people that have been diagnosed with the symptoms, so I am currently in quarantine. Therefore, if you have a friend or family member that has showcased the relevant symptoms, for his safety and ours, please contact the nearest standing officers. This is a

matter of life and death, and he or she needs immediate medical attention. Even I am in quarantine, so do not worry, this will be not a death panel.

It is easy to say not to worry but hard to practice; I know because I too need to convince myself of that every single day. Every time I pass by the window, I run into complete darkness instead of the trees, clouds, sky, mountains, or sea that I expect to greet me, and then I feel the claw of anxiety slowly reaching towards me...

However!" and Yao Yuan rallied in tone, "do not surrender to despair! Even if there are only 120000 of us left, even if everywhere we turn is an empty space, do not lose hope and do not give in! Because we are the only hope left to light the pathway for the future of humanity!

Everyone on this ship, no matter whether you're a scientist, a technician, a soldier, or a normal office worker, even if you're a felon or conman, it doesn't matter! Because that's the past. Ever since you stepped onto this ship, there's only one

way left and that's forward! So do not lose hope and soldier on! For our future, we shall unite, persevere, and survive!

And so, starting tomorrow, the martial law will be rescinded, so do adhere back to your everyday schedule. Within the next month, we plan to launch by stages public emporiums and piazzas. There will be simple entertainment amenities, computer centers where everyone will be given daily access to one hour of internet service, as well as public baths where the shower limit will be increased from the current once

per three days to once per two days. Everyone will also be given the opportunity to enjoy a relaxing bath once per week. Within the next three to six months, we will roll out rudimentary systems of civility. Things like trading posts with currency, a better merit system that rewards hard work with better entertainment and relaxation quotas, promotions, and also the chance to visit the sixth floor biomes to gain contact with nature..."

After Yao Yuan charted out his plans for the future, he concluded it with, "I would like

our future to be full of hope with achievable targets and goals. So do not lose hope; keep it alive not just for yourself but for the next generation. Of the 120000 people, there are about 10000 children, and they need us to not give in! Think of them because they are our future!

Within the next six months, we will also roll out an employment plan that will be bracketed according to expertise and specialization. There will be occupations like teachers, artists, and social workers. And also, within the next month, the government will recruit an

additional one thousand and five hundred military units. Of those one thousand and five hundred spots, one thousand and two hundred will be limited to males from the ages of eighteen to twenty eight while the remaining three hundred spots will be for specialists like nurses and doctors. The point is to not be worried about unemployment. This is a spaceship; the government is self-serving and the people are free to select the job they prefer. Salary will be stratified according to contribution and workload. Commitment and dedication will lead to promotion and eventual migration into residential

districts where there will be no more camping but actual home units with individual rooms, bathrooms, and kitchen.

Therefore, do not lose sight of your future! Let's work together and we will face every coming challenge head on!"

Yao Yuan ceased communications. After going over his speech, he confirmed that he had expressed both of the points he wanted to. One was to provide explanation for the declaration of martial law

and two was to elaborate his future plans for life on the Noah Two. Without any political experience, he believed he had done the best he could.

"Hmm, hopefully this crisis we're having will be successfully overcome. Nevertheless, it has been said that people unite in the face of crisis. Hopefully, by rallying through this ordeal, the lingering feeling of xenophobia and anxiety within the people could be extinguished. Hope, to not lose sight of hope is indeed what we need..." Yao Yuan murmured silently to himself, before finally noticing the

pathologists beside him. Addressing them, he said, "Then I will leave this in your hands. Please finish my analysis report as soon as possible and be firm about quarantine procedure. Even if the report comes back with nothing worrying, inject my blood into other animals. If they come out healthy, the quarantine may be lifted in a month.

And in a month... we will have almost reached that planet... I guess we'll see how things go from there. Until then..." Yao Yuan let a yawn escape. Lowering himself down into a

more comfortable position, Yao Yuan, tired from all the tests and the speech, slipped into a slumber before he could continue.

The ambience within the Noah Two noticeably lightened after Yao Yuan's speech. In fact, it was quite possibly the best it had ever been since they took flight. During the period of martial law, the people had found the restrictions to be comforting as a counterbalancing salve to the months of suffering under chaos. Even though it was quite restrictive to their freedom, it was done in the name of their

safety, and since their greatest worry was having anarchy replicated on Noah Two, it had a palliative effect on their overall feeling of anxiety. As the inner workings of the Noah Two slowly reverted to normal, so did their well-being.

Furthermore, it was indeed as Yao Yuan had predicted; a sense of hope was often more important than anything else. What Yao Yuan had promised them was a hopeful future, and that had smoothed over most wounds.

And time rolled by in the continuing period of normalcy...

After the initial scare of heightened fever, the Black Stars woke up one by one. This was followed by Zhang Heng and another eighty plus civilians. Of the total five hundred plus that had fallen to the fevered delirium, only one hundred and two survived, and this included every member of the Black Star Unit with the exception of Guang Zhen. The mortality rate was over eighty percent. What was curious though was that there were no traces of virus residue from the patients' bodies

and the survivors had neither lingering symptoms nor contractive properties.

The virus came and left without notice, carrying with it over four hundred lives and leaving behind only one message... the cosmos was much more dangerous and mysterious than man could ever fathom.

There were speculations of galactic radiation, side effects of space warp, and even a new species of atom-sized virus, but without actual proof, these

theories went nowhere. Furthermore, none of the surviving hundred and two people had relapsed.

In Noah Two's electronic flight log, this period was marked under the incident of Virus X, a virus whose effect will remain latent until much later. Until then, what Virus X had brought was the awareness of the backwardness of mankind's medical science that it would allow a more than eighty percent fatality rate.

As Zhang Heng exited the sterilization area, he took a deep breath. Even though every area within the Noah Two was connected by its air filters, Zhang Heng couldn't help but feel that the air outside was much fresher compared to the air in the quarantine chamber. To have to spend his every waking hour within that small enclosure for one whole month was a real torture for him... a torture one hundred, no, one thousand times worse than his rehab. At least during rehab, he had a target to work towards, but this past month had been him staring blankly at the wall. The boredom was mind-shattering.

As he turned around, before him stood a few members of the Black Star Unit. They were all looking at Zhang Heng with machiavellian grins. Zhang Heng shrugged off the feeling of being scrutinized before realizing that beside them stood three gorgeous ladies. There were the mousy Mao Miao, the voluptuous Ning Xue, and Bo Li, who was striding towards him with her eyes glued to the pages of her book.

Isolated from human contact for so long, Zhang Heng was

flustered as he tried to think of an appropriate greeting. Scratching his head, he uttered, "Sorry for leaving you guys waiting. I was acting a bit stupid there because the quarantine was so long..."

Before he could continue though, Bo Li stopped before him, saying, "...Okay, then goodbye. I'm going back." Without taking her eyes off her book, she made a turn to leave.

Before she could get away though, Ning Xue grabbed hold

of her and swiveled her back to face Zhang Heng. Demurely smiling, Ning Xue then said, "I'm sorry, she has always been like this. Some days ago, she even locked herself in her room for five days straight. God knows when she went to the canteen for food. She's probably addicted to those books of hers... Anyway, Zhang Heng, we're here to thank you in person for taking such good care of us. It's because of your intervention that we were allowed the rooms on the fifth floor. We later found out that civilians are limited to tents in the lower three floors, so... thank you very much."

Mao Miao, who was cowering beside her, also added, "Zhang... Zhang Heng, thank you..." After that, the red-faced Mao Miao went back into hiding behind Ning Xue.

Unsure of his required response, Zhang Heng continued scratching his head. Ebon sidled over and clapped his gigantic hand on Zhang Heng's shoulder. In a roaring laugh, he said, "Still a player, I see! Your reputation does serve you justice!"

That made Zhang Heng even

more awkward, but what Ebon said next caused his heart to skip a beat and the smile on his face freeze.

"Captain's orders: Zhang Heng will be promoted to the rank of lieutenant and will be officially joining the Black Star Unit as a computer technician. Effective immediately!"

Subconsciously, Zhang Heng stood at ready and yelled, "Sir, yes, sir!"

Ebon though started laughing again. "Okay, okay, there's no need for that. Ol' Cap'n's not here anyway... In any case, Zhang Heng, you have to undergo intensive firearms training. You have five days to at least master how to handle a pistol."

Zhang Heng curiously asked, "Why? Why is there a five day limit?"

"Because Cap'n has decided to dispatch the first landing party in five days. We, the Black Stars,

will be leading man's first
expeditionary platoon onto an
alien planet!"

Chapter 23: THE FALL

"Entering the planet's third orbital track in thirty seconds. Counting down, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven..."

After one month and eight days of slow propulsion through space, at about eleven A.M, the Hope was finally entering the desert planet's orbital track. Within the next thirty seconds, the ship would be touching the planet's atmospheric layer.

The Hope was actually the Noah Two. It was what the people started referring to the spaceship as after Yao Yuan's uplifting speech. After a while, the moniker even spread across the authority. It wasn't before long that it officially replaced the name Noah Two.

The desert planet was the only interstellar entity within the Hope's reach. According to multiple reports, the planet appeared to have an ozone layer and a physical surface fully covered by amber sand. Its mass was 0.007 percent greater than Earth's. Its size wasn't great, and

it seemed to have a gravitational pull similar to that of Earth's.

However, the planet had a fast rotation with regards to both itself and its sun. A day on this planet was sixteen hours long and a year was equal to two hundred and seventy days on Earth.

Further reports also revealed that the surface temperature during the planet's day would be around fifty degrees Celsius while dropping to under ten degree Celsius when night fell.

The night-and-day temperature difference was extreme, but it was still within mankind's acceptable range.

The Hope's team of astronomers and astrophysicists had spent much effort and time calculating and recalculating the planet's data because this might be the location where the Hope will spend its next few years. Other than information that needed actual contact to be calibrated, like ozone and surface components as well as its flora and fauna, everything else about the planet was tallied and measured.

The results of all these analyses, with the exception of reports on the planet's weather patterns, pointed towards a safe landing. Its balmy weather was a dangerous anomaly because it didn't explain the extremely desertified planet surface. A month of observation showed no traces of natural disasters. Of course, due to the sandy nature of the planet's surface, they would still need to care for the possibility of quicksand and sand traps. These dangers depended on the level of solidity of the surface, so it was a risk that couldn't be calculated unless they were on the planet

itself.

"Because we are unable to ascertain the planet's atmospheric and geological structures, it will be too much of a risk to attempt a direct landing of the Hope. Therefore, we need to first deploy an expeditionary unit for initial inspection. This scouting party will be taking a mini-shuttle to the planet," said Yao Yuan, addressing the four men before him. They were Ying, Ebon, and Liu Bai, who were senior members of the Black Star Unit, as well as its newest recruit, Zhang Heng. The four were going to be

leading the ship's first planetary landing party which was made up of twenty elite agents and eight scientists.

"There are only three of these shuttles within the Hope. These spacecrafts are unique because they can channel sufficient velocity to pierce through a planet's atmosphere within a short timeframe both when entering it and leaving it. Equipped with an anti-gravitational system, they can support eighteen hours of continuous flight. With our current technology and materials... we are still unable to

manufacture these kinds of shuttles, so each one of them is incredibly valuable. As the first landing party, you guys will be taking one," explained Yao Yuan. Next he turned to address his own men one by one. "Now I want to explain why I've selected the four of you to lead this crucial party. Ying, you're the most clear-headed of all the Black Stars, myself included. So, in cases of emergency and/or if communications are cut off, I want you to take charge and use your experience and analytical mind to lead everyone back to safety. Ebon, your role is to support Ying when necessary and to be the commander to the twenty elite soldiers. Xiao Bai,

you're naturally the team's medic, but you'll also be acting as the lieutenant that supports Ebon. Lastly, Zhang Heng, you must be curious as to why I've scripted you into this party. The reason's simple: because your computer skill is the best among everyone aboard this ship." Yao Yuan couldn't help but feel gladdened at his serendipitous encounter with Zhang Heng. The young hacker had helped them acquire the spaceship and now was yet another valuable asset to the Black Star Unit.

"Zhang Heng, I'll be honest with you. Within this past

month, we have collated a proficiency chart by reviewing everyone onboard. We could refer to this chart to easily identify the best and brightest among the different communities so that when issues arise, we could locate the necessary individuals in no time. For example, for questions about aerospace engineering, we have quite a few rocket scientists to refer to and we have engineers and technicians for welding and molding of ship parts, but guess who's at the top of the list for computer proficiency. It's none other than yourself, and that's why you are instrumental to the success of this expedition. In fact, your role might be the most

important.

Within the shuttle, there's a multi-frequency communicator. It's a future-tech product that was probably created alongside the space warp system. Even through all sorts of environmental disturbances, be it electromagnetic or locational suppression, it will recalibrate itself to locate the frequencies needed to maintain a stable communications channel with the Hope. There is, however, a catch; the device is encrypted. The encryption is written into the communicator's programming, so it can't be

removed. Even though its defense was heavily weakened when the government bombarded the ship with viruses to achieve entry, gaining full access over it is still troublesome because it will reconstruct a different encrypted firewall every ten minutes. That's the device's fatal flaw." Yao Yuan allowed himself a long sigh before continuing, "Fact is, the space-warping system also comes with such an encrypted protection, but thanks to the ship's own advanced AI and the professor's decryption key, this is a non-issue. It doesn't work that way with the communicator though; it needs manual intervention, and that's where

you come in, Zhang Heng. The communicator is linked to the spaceship and thus presumably has a similar encryption pattern. You're already familiar with the decryption key, so I'm sure you can handle it... I know this is a big responsibility, but you're the best hacker we have. In any case, I have full faith in you because despite being a fresh one, you're still a Black Star!"

There's a chinese idiom that goes, "He who knows the time and circumstance is a wise man," and people who are born with a silver spoon, like Zhang Heng, are usually such wise men.

When he heard Yao Yuan's explanation, the first thought that popped into his mind was to find excuses to weasel his way out, but he was quick to realize that there wasn't any escape path. There was no one for him to turn to; he had to fend for himself now. And so, instead of going through an extended back-and-forth, which would still end up with him on the shuttle, Zhang Heng gravely nodded, signifying an understanding of his placement.

Yao Yuan acknowledged him with a nod in return. He then resumed, "Then you should go

get ready. The shuttle will be leaving in half an hour. Also, when the shuttle pushes through the ozone layer, its carapace will beam the ozone layer's pH reading to its computer. If the readings show that it's overly acidic or alkaline, abort the mission and return to ship... If everything works fine though, after landing, you will need to immediately gather necessary information. This includes details like the planet's atmospheric components, bacterial make-up, geological structure, and the desert surface's density to help us decide whether landing the Hope is permissible.

And then there're also these things to be careful about..."

Yao Yuan droned on for another ten minutes before the four could leave to take the electromobile to the shuttle's hangar. On the journey there, Zhang Heng let loose his thoughts. "I'm surprised; he isn't usually so wordy. Major Yao Yuan, I mean."

Ying appeared to not have heard Zhang Heng's comment. He sat silently, checking his

rifle's barrel before proceeding to fixing his magazine of electromagnetic bullets. Ebon, who sat beside him, answered, "Ol' Cap'n is such a man. Normally, he's extremely reticent; he could even give this guy here a run for his money." He nudged Ying with the butt of his assault rifle which he was deconstructing to check for kinks. "But during every operation briefing, he will go on and on... Alright, you can stop staring at me now, Ying. I know that's just Ol' Cap'n being cautious, and many times his prudence has saved our lives, I'm fully aware of that; I just wish he wasn't such a long-winded mother hen every time."

He trailed off in his signature booming laugh.

Liu Bai added, with a smile, "Zhang Heng, you're new to the Black Star Unit, so you're still unfamiliar with Ol' Cap'n's ways, but he's only so cautious because he doesn't want anyone to lose their lives over his carelessness. You'll get used to it and see that behind his every action, he has our best interest at heart."

The amiable exchange continued until they reached a

platform where twenty soldiers and eight scientists stood waiting. Behind them loomed the shuttle. It looked just like a jet fighter but larger and longer.

The four descended the automobile without any more words, each packing their necessary luggage; Ying and Ebon with their weapons, Liu Bai with his medical case, Zhang Heng with his laptop and electronic paraphernalia. After some last-minute inventory, the four Black Stars led the twenty agents and eight excited scientists on board the shuttle and stood ready for departure.

"Closing the first inner hangar door. All personnel, please vacate the area. Opening the shuttle exit in thirty seconds, neutralizing gravity forces..."

"Moving the first shuttle to hangar rail, scanning rail perimeters... Confirmed clearance of obstructions, charging propulsion energy. Preparing for blast off in thirty seconds..."

"Counting down to blast off in thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-

eight..."

All across the Hope, the eyes of its 120000 occupants were collectively glued to a video feed of the shuttle. This was because history was being made! This was going to be mankind's first landing party on an alien planet, a planet with an ozone layer, light years away from earth!

Many were quietly praying to their own gods and deities, but their collective hope was for the landing party to have a successful mission. They had

hope for a future on this new planet...

Although hope was a weightless thing, the thirty plus people onboard the shuttle could feel the weight of the collective hope from 120000 people on their shoulders.

Finally, the thirty second countdown came to a close. Discharging pulsing electronic energy from its rear, the shuttle glided swiftly through the rails before dislodging itself out of the Hope. After floating for a bit

in space and shifting for the optimum angle, the shuttle shot towards the planet. As it flew through the ozone layer, the extreme friction between the shuttle and the planet's atmosphere had the shuttle lit up like a fiery bullet.

This had everyone's hearts up their throats. Thankfully, the shuttle got through the ozone layer without incident. After it pushed itself through the ozone layer, the anti-gravity device kicked in and the shuttle crested through the air before stabilizing. It then slowly descended towards the planet's

surface. Ying's voice crackled through the receiver, reporting that everything had stabilized.

Through the live feed, the citizens of the Hope closely followed the shuttle's progress. When they saw it slow to a standstill, they knew the dangers were over. It was now on anti-gravity support, so crashing was no longer an imminent possibility. The whole of the Hope breathed a collective sigh of relief before erupting in celebration. There were joyful laughs and teary embraces.

Back in the shuttle, two scientists were hurriedly collecting air samples through robotic arms that extended out of the shuttle. Using a makeshift lab that was constructed within the shuttle, the pair was busy conducting analysis on the sealed bags of air. Too many things hinged upon their result and so all the people onboard had their eyes glued to the pair of frantic and excited scientists, including Zhang Heng, who was standing ready with the communicator.

"... The result is out! But... but, this is impossible! In the

atmosphere, there are two types of ox..."

In the conference room, Yao Yuan, the rest of the Black Stars, and almost all of the scientists were at the other end of the communication. The transmission was also connected to the rest of the Hope. However, no one could make sense of what they had heard...

Ox... oxygen..?

Just as they were waiting for

more clarification, about ten people on the Hope had a sudden aspiration of premonition. This group of people, Yao Yuan included, all sprang up and yelled,

"Stop! Stop the descent!"

On the live feed, it appeared like gravity had decided to catch up with the shuttle, because the shuttle, which was sitting at a flat angle seconds ago, suddenly tipped downwards and started to freefall.

The ground a few thousand feet below was waiting to greet it. Even with the possibility of crash-landing into a carpet of soft sand, the long falling distance combined with acceleration could only lead to one conclusion...

Total annihilation!

Chapter 24: BEYOND THE SHUTTLE!

The first individual to sense that something was wrong was Ying, who was operating the shuttle. He was besieged by a flash of premonition moments before the anti-gravitational device shut down.

Ying brushed the feeling away, marking it down as tricks of his overly anxious mind. After all, it was man's first expedition onto a celestial body other than the moon, so a certain degree of danger was to be expected.

The range of possible catastrophes included sudden windstorms, illnesses caused by the wide variance in day and night temperatures, alien pathogens oft-featured in science fiction, or even life-threatening encounters with extra-terrestrial lifeforms... Their mission had their lives on the line, and Ying was justified in dismissing the ominous feeling as unnecessary worry so as to not have it fogging his mind.

The shuttle's anti-gravitational

system fitted its interior with a simulated gravity field, so its passengers could move around as if they were on Earth's solid ground. Even after they entered the planet's atmosphere, the anti-gravitational system recalibrated itself, adjusting the indoor gravitational force to offset that of the planet's in an effort to maintain a stable gravitational environment within. The descent was smooth, and because of that, only the small handful of its seated passengers who were particularly cautious wore seatbelts. They were all in space suits, but none of them had their helmets on.

The moment the anti-gravitational system broke down, those that weren't strapped into a seatbelt, meaning most of them, were thrown violently around the room before getting shoved up against the walls or onto the floor.

At the height of five thousand meters off the ground, Ying's feeling of dread resurged in full vengeance. At one moment, the shuttle was floating down safely, but in the next, he could literally see the room tilting downwards.

Everyone had their bodies pressed against the walls or the ground, immobilized as the shuttle began its plummet towards the planet's surface.

Ying was one of the few who wore a seatbelt. His extra cautiousness that was often chided by his teammates was quite possibly the saving grace that had preserved everyone's lives. He knew he had to reach the buttons on the panel before him, but because he was crammed forcefully into his seat, it had taken him a few tries before eventually hitting the necessary buttons.

The buttons fired up the boosters that were attached to the shuttle's rear, buffering the speed of their drop. However, this was about twenty seconds after the shuttle started plummeting. By then, they were already falling at a tremendous speed and were dangerously close to the ground. Even with buffeting from the boosters' fiery propulsion, it couldn't overcome the shuttle's overall downwards momentum.

Working to regain control of the shuttle, a sweat-soaked Ying

yelled across the room,
“Mayday! Mayday! We’re hitting
the ground soon and hard! Brace
yourselves for a harsh landing!”

That was, however, easier said
than done. People were still
getting flung across surfaces,
and the boosters’ propulsion
merely added to the force that
was juggling people about. Only
the few who were physically
trained were able to crawl to
their seats and struggle to fasten
their seatbelts. The shuttle hit
the ground with an intense
impact, its vibration surging
through the room. The shuttle
then proceeded to slide several

meters across the sandy surface before stopping and lodging itself several meters into the ground.

After the rocky landing, the interior was in a completely ramshackle state. Thankfully, everyone had space suits on, so their bodies were padded and protected. However, because they decided not to wear their helmets, an unlucky few had suffered head injuries, but the fall was basically just a rough tumble. For quite some time, other than cries and groans of pain, no sound was heard.

Coming out of his daze, a scientist suddenly issued in alarm, “No! The air’s leaking!”

That whipped everyone into attention. Frantically putting on their protective helmets, they rushed to check the shuttle walls for cracks. It took them quite some time to realize that the scientist who had issued the alarm wasn’t up on his feet inspecting the walls as they were. Instead, he was shaking on the floor and staring intently at a shredded translucent bag before him. It took everyone

some time to place this seemingly unfamiliar object, but once they realized that it was one of the bags that held the planet's air sample, their faces blanched. It was too late; they were already breathing in the planet's air!

The significance that they had alien air in their lungs shouldn't be downplayed. They were in an alien atmosphere, so no one knew what was in it. Even if it had just one strain of a mild alien flu virus, they would be expecting a tragic death because none of them had immunity against it.

Understanding that panic could only be harmful to their situation, a scientist standing by quickly added, “Everyone, please don’t worry just yet. We’re still unclear on whether this planet supports any life. Plus, it’s a desert planet; the air is extremely dry, so, technically speaking, it would be extremely unfavorable for the germination of microbes and viruses. So don’t fret; first check whether you’re feeling a burning sensation around your mouth and nose. This is to confirm whether the air is corrosive.”

The scientist's words had an instant calming effect, making most of the people present sigh in relief. They searched for traces of burning sensations, but no one could find any. It was as if they were breathing in normal air.

Only a few of the scientists held a worried pallor. This was because they knew that it was incorrect to apply Earth's understanding of microbiological behavior on this alien planet due to the environments being utterly different. However, they knew that it was not the time to

mention that and so they stood quietly watching this scientist who was currently working to reconstruct the makeshift laboratory.

The man was about fifty years of age. With wet blood still dripping from his head wound, he was already fully focused on conducting analysis on the air sample in one of the test tubes. The people in the shuttle were as silent as mice as they awaited his result. After what felt like an eternity, the scientist released a breath that nobody realized he was holding before shifting into a surprised expression.

“...About twenty percent of the atmosphere is made up of oxygen while its majority, sixty eight percent to be precise, is nitrogen. Eleven percent of it is composed of a unique gas while the remaining fraction is made up of carbon dioxide and noble gases. This unique gas is still unidentified, but what's certain is that it is not corrosive and not a variation of the poisonous carbon monoxide group. It's similar to inert gases in that it doesn't appear to have an oxidation reaction with our blood...”

He excitedly continued, “Do you know what this means? This means that the air’s breathable! We humans could very much survive in this atmosphere!”

The scientist got increasingly animated through his elaboration. At one point, he started pointing at the salvaged lab, saying, “I can’t find any microbe traces through the microscope, granted you’ll need a more powerful microscope to detect the presence of viruses. That should be done once we return to the Hope’s main laboratory, but based on everything we have at the

moment, I am willing to conclude that... the atmosphere of this planet with its complete lack of airborne water particles is unable to support the growth of any microbes and viruses. Everyone, we are so lucky!

We're standing on a planet that could very well sustain the hope for our future! It has a non-harmful atmosphere and the fact that it has oxygen means that it should also carry plants because of photosynthesis. To escape direct sun exposure, they are probably hidden somewhere, but the fact that there's oxygen in the air confirms their

existence. The most important part is that... we humans can survive on this planet!”

At this juncture, the man broke into tears, the rest of his exclamations submerged in his sobbing.

Ying stood up after a while, usurping all the attention the scientist previously held. He then addressed the group. “Listen up, everyone. Until we are one hundred percent certain that there are no harmful elements in the air, keep your

space helmets on. We are not going to risk it... Okay, I admit the process wasn't exactly smooth sailing, but we have indeed successfully landed, so proceed with your designated tasks. Each scientist will be issued two guardians when you venture outside the shuttle to complete your assignments. Zhang Heng, you remain to help with the communicator. Everyone else, get moving. We don't have much time left; we must return to the ship before our supply of air runs out."

With that, everyone got into motion. The scientists went off

to their respective areas to finish their work, each escorted by two soldiers. The remaining soldiers were led off by Liu Bai and Ebon who were the first ones to step outside of the shuttle to secure its perimeter. When there was only Ying and Zhang Heng in the shuttle, Ying said, “Zhang Heng... Unlock the communicator. I wish to gain contact with the Hope.”

Zhang Heng went into action quickly. Seating himself before the shuttle’s control panel, he started hacking the communicator. After about five minutes, he breathed a sigh of

relief and almost
simultaneously, a voice
reverberated through the
shuttle,

“Central command to
expedition squad. Central
command to expedition squad.
Please respond if you hear this...
Central command to expedition
squad. Central command to
expedition squad. Please
respond if you hear this...”

Ying hurried to the
communicator, saying, “Central
command, this is the expedition

squad.”

“...Ying, is everything alright? Is anyone injured? Is the shuttle still operational? What happened? The shuttle suddenly dropped out of the sky.” The communicator relayed Yao Yuan’s questions.

In a serious tone, Ying answered, “When we were at fifty thousand meters above ground when the shuttle’s anti-gravitational system suddenly malfunctioned, and it has been non-operational since then.

However, according to the shuttle's self-diagnostics, the system had no issues. Its machinery and power source are all fine, and it's showing on the screen that it's operating, but the weirdest thing is that it doesn't seem to have any effect!"

"...Use the communicator to relay the anti-gravitational system's data back to the Hope for analysis. How about others? Has there been fatalities? Could the shuttle still take flight? Anything out of the ordinary to report?" asked Yao Yuan.

Ying replied, “The shuttle can still fly. Thanks to the shuttle’s water and sand-resistant carapace, we can still fly using the fuel-powered rockets. But without the anti-gravitational system, a rocket launch pad, or booster rockets, there’s little chance of the shuttle breaking through the ozone layer... People-wise, some suffered injuries from the fall, but none suffered injuries serious enough that Xiao Bai can’t handle. Also, we have the initial report on the planet’s atmospheric components. Other than an unidentified gas that makes up eleven percent of the atmosphere, the air is almost identical to Earth’s air.

According to one scientist, this planet's air is harmless for humans. We will know for sure after we make sure there's no presence of harmful alien microbes and pathogens.

Until now, we have received no contact with the planet's organisms. The sandy surface also appears to be firm enough to not be a sea of quicksand. I'll beam over a more detailed analysis after they are done with tests on the surface's bearing capacity..."

After a pregnant silence, Yao Yuan uttered, "Okay, then I'll be waiting for the results and data... It must have been mighty inconvenient because we are still unable to understand and design anti-gravity schematics. It's because of that that this disaster happened, but don't worry, I promise I'll get you men out of there."

As if talking with Yao Yuan in person, Ying nodded and replied, "Of course, I have full faith in Ol' Cap'n's words... Then the expedition party will stay on guard waiting for rescue. Ending transmission."

While contact was being made with the Hope inside the shuttle, outside of it, the platoon led by Ebon and Liu Bai took man's first step unto this alien planet.

Under their feet was a layer of golden-brown sand which gave a little with each of their steps. However, underneath that granular surface layer was a more compact sand layer. After the first soldier stood firmly on this ground, the rest of them followed closely behind, each carrying their weapons, with eyes trained on their

surroundings. Under the glow of this galaxy's sun, the ground shone in its glittering majesty. The waves of sand spread as far as they could see, empty of threat and interest.

However, unbeknownst to everyone amidst the agitation and excitement was the fact that a number of beakers had been broken during the rocky tumble. Among them was a beaker containing distilled water which pooled around the shuttle's exit. On their way out, the men had unnoticeably stepped on it. The water particles that adhered to the inner linings of their soles

evaporated quickly after coming into contact with the burning sand...

Carried by desert winds, these particles of water floated out to several hundred kilometers away, unwittingly signaling the arrival of Ying's expedition group...

Chapter 25: The rescue!

"Someone answer me! Why did the anti-gravitational system stop working?" thundered Yao Yuan before the rest of conference room. This was the first time Yao Yuan had been so forward with his anger outside of being with a Black Star member. Normally he would reserve a certain degree of deference before the Hope's scientific community.

Before the operation, he had considered all the risks it entailed and enacted

contingency plans warding against the possibility of a corrosive atmosphere. He also carefully considered the loading limit of the shuttle and even dangerous encounters with aliens. However, he failed to foresee his plan being trounced by a malfunctioning future-tech system. He found it difficult to forgive himself for such a gross oversight!

Yao Yuan knew the risk involved when he ordered the dispatch of the expedition party, so he had mentally prepared himself for reports of casualties similar to how he had accepted

it when a few of his comrades fell in their initial search of the spaceship. The philosophy was that sometimes sacrifices needed to be made in order to achieve victory. This was heavily reflected in the Black Star Unit's motto: for glory or for death!

However, there was no glory in death caused by neglect and carelessness. It was due to his lapse as the commanding officer that his men would have to pay with their lives! This was no sacrifice, this was a waste!

Standing at the podium, Yao Yuan enunciated his directive with force and clarity. "All the necessary data has been transmitted. People, I know that what I'm asking is difficult to fulfill, but we are running out of time. Down there we have eight scientists, twenty plus elite agents, and four lieutenants whose lives depend on the shuttle's supply of oxygen which will run out in eight to ten hours. I can't stress this enough: these are human lives waiting to be saved and we are running out of time."

The room Yao Yuan was

addressing was full to the brim with astronomers, physicists, biologists, meteorologists, and basically all people of sciences that were related to space travel. They stood ready to heed Yao Yuan's orders. The same could be said about the team of technicians that had packed another conference room. Through the use of a video feed, they too were waiting on Yao Yuan's commands.

"I'll keep things simple: there are only three questions that I need answered. One, how could the faulty mechanism pass through initial inspection? Two,

what is the reason for its malfunction, and is there a way to fix it? Three, outside of repairing the anti-gravitational system, are there other ways available to rescue the expedition party?"

After he said so, Yao Yuan planted himself on the stage, explaining, "I'll be waiting here for updates. Go do whatever needs to be done to answer these three questions, especially the last one. People, down there are our kin and they need our help. These thirty-two lives are too precious to be lost, and they're counting on you to save them!"

Time on the Hope slowly trickled away. The 120000 people on board all knew about the fate of the expedition party. They were still alive but only for another eight to ten hours before their oxygen ran out. Within that time frame, the Hope had to figure out a way to reach and rescue them, or they might never return again...

It was now one hour and twenty minutes since the crash-landing...

In the biology lab...

"...no, no, no. These are just pictures; if magnified under the microscope, what you're getting are pixelated images. Damn it!" growled Saburo, punctuating his frustration with a punch on the metal desk. His disgruntlement was shared by his assistants as well as other biologists in the room.

It was their assignment to confirm whether any dangerous pathogens existed in the planet's air. It was a hard task because

they literally had no idea what they were looking for; no one knew what alien microbes or viruses looked like. Were they [bioseston](#) or [tripton](#)... and if they were tripton, should they consider the possibility of them being non-carbon based existences, such as a type of silicon-based organism? The cosmos was so gigantic that there could be lifeforms with various biochemical make-ups, and they needn't all necessarily be carbon-based.

Mankind, along with most of the organisms on earth, is structured with a carbon-based

biochemistry. That's why we rely on digestion and absorption of carbohydrates, which are chemically organic compounds of oxygen, hydrogen, and carbon, for the energy to survive.

However, it is not only carbon that can carry biological information. Like carbon, silicon can create molecules that are sufficiently large to sustain life. This is why silicon-based lifeforms are common features in science fictions, but who can affirmatively say that such organisms can't be found in space? The silicon-based

biochemical make-up doesn't need water or oxygen to function, so even though the planet's arid atmosphere is not conducive for the breeding of carbon-based viruses, who can be certain it doesn't contain silicon-based microbes?

This was the predicament facing Saburo and his team of biologists, pathologists, and epidemic prevention experts. Their knowledge of alien microbiology was too limited to form any worthwhile analyses. Furthermore, what they were given were air sample analysis results and a few pictures of the

air particles; they had no access to an actual sample. How could they come up with any significant findings without conducting a full field analysis?

Behind Saburo, a fair Caucasian sighed. "Let's just own up to the major. With what we have now, it's simply impossible to proffer a conclusive result."

A dark-skinned pathologist added, "That's true. We're scientists, not psychics. How could we tell whether there are pathogens in the air based on a

few pictures? This is a fool's task. Let's just go and explain our situation to the major, sir."

This sentiment was picked up by a few other people in the room. They were in agreement that the assignment was simply too demanding... Yao Yuan's show of unfettered fury today had shocked the scientific community, so they hedged their bet on being honest with their complications early rather than bear the brunt of his fury after much dallying and still coming up empty-handed by the end.

Another slam on the table squelched the seed of disavowal. Saburo uttered, in a simmering growl, "No! This is thirty-two lives we are talking about... I will not have their blood on my hands because of our laziness! This is why I've studied to become a pathologist, to give people a chance at survival. I will not back down, not this time..."

He turned around and regarded his subordinates with almost enmity in his eyes, saying, "Help me contact the major. Tell him I wish to access the central mainframe and I need him to

initiate its root program, the one that was said to be connected to the anti-gravitational system, multi-frequency communicator, and space-warp system, the one that's operating all the future-tech systems..."

It was now one hour and fifty minutes since the crash-landing...

In the physics and anti-gravity analytics laboratory...

Ever since the physicists found

out about the anti-gravity manipulators on the Hope, they had been conducting numerous experiments on them, trying to decipher their theoretical functionalities. Even though man could build these intricate machines, their theories, physical bases, and production mechanisms were still unknown. When it came to these machines, it wasn't actually building but rather reconstructing them from schematics that were already there. Man's understanding of these machines was so lacking that even a simple change in size could lead to a faulty product.

The gravity manipulator wasn't a blocky engine like many expected, it had the appearance of an electrical circuit. It snaked around the carapaces of the shuttle, hovercraft, and spaceship and was barely noticeable if one didn't go purposely looking for it.

The purpose of this special laboratory was to dissect the theories and applications behind this mechanism. If they could figure out how it operated, man's understanding of physics would be improved by leaps and bounds!

At this time, about ten physicists and numerous lab assistants were busy analyzing the data transferred over by the shuttle. A set of gravity manipulators was placed in the center of the room to offer a practical understanding of the data.

It was a long but thin strand of complex mechanisms, barely fitting in between one's fingers. It wrapped around the area cordoned off for gravitational experiments like an abstract, futuristic mural. Underneath its

rubber wrapping was a series of conductors which would convert electricity into gravitational force... When viewed in the context of man's technological progress, it was something akin to a miracle.

Hanging his head in defeat, a wizened senior physicist sighed. "This is impossible... we can't possibly conclude why the system broke down if we are given such a short amount of time. To do that we require many more simulations and much more time... We will have to inform the major. It can't be helped..."

As he made ready to leave the room, a female voice rang out beside him.

"It's electrical resistance..."

The source was Bo Li, one of the women Zhang Heng had requested to save. Due to her background as a physics doctorate student, she was recommended a position in the lab by the employment committee. Since her time there, she milled about her work in a cocoon of silence, so no one

had expected her to speak up then.

Since she had uttered those three words though, everyone had their attention trained on her, many of them with open shock at her audacity to speak out of her place. A few other assistants were even walking over to escort her out of the room.

The leading physicist, however, requested her to repeat herself. "What did you just say? Explain clearly. What is it about

electrical resistance?"

Bo Li was unused to having so many people's focus on her and she could feel the initial shock of some of her colleagues turning into anxiety and even envy. She felt like shrugging them off with her usual silence, but right then, she felt a sudden burst of inspiration flow through her, charging her through her speedy elaboration,

"Because the system uses electricity to simulate gravity, it will have electrical resistance.

That resistance is usually monitored and countered by the automated system. However, if there's a foreign interference that causes an unaccountable rise in the electrical resistance, for example, something like an alien force field, then the system would be dampened in its overall output. The resistance could be strong enough to neutralize the gravitational force discharge. The fact that the shuttle's computer reported a functional system despite not creating an effective gravitational force to support levitation is in support of this analysis. I believe electrical resistance could be one of the reasons why it isn't working..."

By the time Bo Li went through her analysis, the fit of inspiration had left her, reverting her back to her normal, inconsequential, quiet self.

The lead physicist frowned through Bo Li's explication and a few minutes after she finished, he issued a series of quick commands. "Lower the voltage of the experimental manipulator by five hundred points, and then crank the numbers! Repeat the lowering by five hundred volts for each successive test! Quick,

get to it! People, don't just sit there; we don't have the time to waste!"

While the rest of the room fell into action, the lead physicist approached Bo Li. "Are you a new trainee? Very nice work. What's your name?"

"It's Bo Li..." she replied detachedly, barely lifting her head to respond to her superior.

"Bo Li? I have not heard of the Bo surname before; is there even

such a surname? No matter. Again, very nice job. If your analysis is correct, I will send a request to the Major to promote you to an official physicist... You know, you might have just saved the lives of the thirty-two people down there. And not only that, if your finding is legitimate, then it could help us land the Hope on that planet!"

His excitement was infectious as he powered on. "If it really was an issue with the voltage resistance, then the Hope, with its store of nuclear energy and the extra energy circuits added as a contingency plan before the

space-warping incident, could bypass this problem. We could generate more than enough voltage to override the resistance!

Listen to me! You might not only be the savior for those thirty two people but the savior for us all!"

Living constituents of seston. Seston being minute material moving in water. It includes both living organisms and nonliving matter.

Suspended nonliving debris in
a body of water.

Chapter 26: THE ENCOUNTER!

It was now six hours after the crash-landing...

Yao Yuan was still seated at the conference room stage, waiting for news from the expedition party and results from the scientific community. Until now, he had been busy parrying requests from the Hope's several academic committees, some of which he allowed, like the one who requested access to the ship's central mainframe.

The person who issued that curious request was the man standing before him now, the head pathologist, Mitsuda Saburo.

Saburo gave Yao Yuan a deep bow as he approached the stage to report his findings. "Major, my team has ascertained that the planet's atmosphere doesn't contain harmful microbes or viruses. I am, however, regretful to inform major that we are still unable to identify the mysterious gas that makes up eleven percent of its

atmosphere. What we were able to find out though is that the gas is indeed non-poisonous, which leads us to happily conclude that this planet's air is breathable by man and it will not bring about any adverse effects."

Frowning, Yao Yuan inquired, "How is it possible that you could come to that conclusion? Didn't your team report that the assignment was impossible because you lack an actual air sample for analysis?"

"That much is true; we are

indeed devoid of an actual sample," Saburo answered, "but with the help of the central mainframe's impressive computing capability, the photos that were beamed over were restored to their original resolution. Looking at those pictures was no difference from looking through a microscope. After comparing those air particles to that of Earth's, we came to a safe conclusion that there are no harmless viruses nor pathogens in the planet's air. Also interesting to note is that the air's incredibly dry... we could barely find one water molecule!"

Yao Yuan silently contemplated the lead pathologist's report. Thinking his report was being challenged, Saburo stared earnestly back at Yao Yuan. Saburo's focused gaze reminded Yao Yuan of his encounter with Ning Bo Tao and his ability to read projections of malice. It was his desperation to save his comrades that had moved him into that superhuman state. It was entirely unconscious, but now he couldn't help but wonder whether he could tap into that power consciously...

(Could the key be imminent danger? Like how I felt my

senses tingling right before the shuttle malfunctioned?)

Yao Yuan pulled himself up and walked around the stage in circles a few times to walk off the thoughts that started to crowd his mind. Others in the room mistook this action as Yao Yuan mulling over whether it was safe to call off the time restraint since the survival of the expedition party was no longer limited by their oxygen supply when in fact Yao Yuan was considering whether it was possible to simulate situations of imminent danger to induce the superhuman experience.

After a few more minutes of ambling back and forth, Yao Yuan planted himself back unto his seat with a loud sigh. It was his understanding that fear of imminent danger was ingrained in man's physiological response. Unless through means of self-hypnosis or infliction of mental manipulation like paranoia, it would be impossible for man to conjure a feeling of imminent danger at will...

"Okay, thank you for your effort, Professor Saburo. You and your team have done a

splendid job. I'll relay your findings to the expedition party. They will be glad to know that there's no danger of running out of air. Please go and enjoy a well-deserved rest. Again, I would like to express my gratitude for you and your team's incredible effort."

Yao Yuan stood up once more to shake Saburo's hand before proceeding to thank each individual member of his team personally.

Saburo could feel a heavy load

lifted from his shoulders, and so did the rest of his crew. Their efforts had paid off handsomely, but more importantly, their labor had saved people's lives... Saburo was particularly relieved because he had found repayment and satisfaction at the end of his perseverance.

(Shiro, Hanako, mom, and dad, I promise you I will not disappoint you, because I know you guys are watching over me...)

After the group of pathologists

and biologists retreated from the room, Yao Yuan slumped back down on his seat. He had requested for updates every ten minutes, so he was well prepared to intercept delegates from the Hope's various academic bodies. What he wasn't prepared for was to have the conference room swamped with one hundred plus members of the different physics committees.

The physics committee was an umbrella term for all the various committees dealing with the subject of physics. Some examples include the

astrophysics and apex physics crews. The fact that all the members of the physics committees with their respective leaders would congregate at the conference room was no small deal. Yao Yuan quickly stood up to greet them because this could only mean that they came bearing news regarding the shuttle's anti-gravitational system.

After a rudimentary consultation, Yao Yuan asked, while frowning, "You mean to say that a shift in the electrical resistance of the gravitational system was the reason for the

shuttle's malfunction? Even if that's true, it is of no use to them because for one, they have no knowledgeable technician, and for another, they have no tools to conduct the necessary modifications. Furthermore, I will not risk landing the Hope on that planet on the basis of a hypothetical theory."

Silewei, the acting resident professor of the physics unit, offered, "If that's the case, we could perform the necessary modifications on another shuttle to test the theory. If the modified shuttle shows that it is indeed the electrical resistance

that interfered with the anti-gravitation system, then we could safely land the Hope because this spaceship can support a high enough voltage discharge to override any disturbance of resistance."

Yao Yuan gave the suggestion some thoughts before agreeing with it. "Okay! The physics committees are allowed free access to all the resources you might need to proceed with the modification. But I want it done fast because even though we have ascertained the relative safety of this planet's open air, there's still the eleven percent

that's unidentified. We need to reach the scouting party as soon as possible."

The committees quickly launched into work as per Yao Yuan's orders. A shuttle had its anti-gravity manipulator removed to be fitted with the suggested modifications.

However, things didn't end up going as smoothly as expected because even though the Hope had 120000 people, none of them had experience with spacecraft construction, much less

someone with ample experience capable of tinkering with gravity-manipulating technology.

That was why it had taken the relevant personnel more than ten hours to complete the modification. What was worse was that the modification was only a rudimentary one; the dangers that it could entail were a worrying unknown...

Operated by a few volunteer soldiers, the second shuttle slowly ejected from the Hope. As

it drifted towards the yellow-colored planet, it had the attention of everyone on board the ship. It was possibly more intense than when they had watched the departure of the first shuttle, for even though it was equally dangerous, this second shuttle carried with it the hope of them landing on the planet... The hope for their future...

As the second shuttle worked its way through the ozone layer, somewhere on the planet was the stranded expedition party. At this moment, all thirty-two of them, still in their spacesuits,

were fast asleep.

It had been twenty hours or, according to this planet's time, one day and two nights since they had landed. Without any food and water intake since they arrived, it was less of a sleep for most of the party but rather a blackout. According to Liu Bai's analysis, if they were to spend yet another twelve hours in such a barren environment, they would be facing serious dehydration, and twelve more hours on top of that would only lead to death!

Making things worse was the fact that the shuttle's store of energy was completely depleted. This was because the anti-gravitational system and the communicator consumed exceptional amounts of power. Other than the fuel reserved for igniting the rockets, the shuttle's reservoir of energy was hitting rock bottom. The anti-gravitational system, the inner heating system, and the communicator had all powered down. Other than the sonar that relayed their location to the Hope, every single electrical appliance in the shuttle was non-operational.

It was safe to say that things were not looking well...

All of a sudden, Ying's, Zhang Heng's, Ebon's, and Liu Bai's eyes shot open and they sat up from their sleeping postures. It was a mystery to them as to why they had suddenly awakened. They were physically spent, but somehow their mental states were heavily agitated right then.

"Tut, tut..."

A series of light taps pierced

through the pregnant silence. The sound was so light that it was barely discernable, but the four were able to tell that it definitely came from beyond the shuttle's entrance.

The four exchanged glances and each could feel chills traveling down their spines. No one had the courage to articulate what was on their minds; even the normally loud and brash Ebon was struck silent. After some time, Ying said, "Rouse the rest of the crew. We have to go out and see what made that sound."

"Is that really necessary? It was probably the wind sweeping the sand against the shuttle's shell. It's not even light yet; let's just stay in here instead of wasting our time," said Zhang Heng with forced cheeriness.

Ebon ignored Zhang Heng and went ahead to wake everyone else up while Liu Bai whispered to Zhang Heng, "That can't be done. As the vanguard unit, we have the responsibility to scout ahead, and this includes... ascertaining the presence of alien organisms. I'm sure you've

heard of the main ship's rescue mission; if they've confirmed it was electrical resistance that weakened the anti-gravitational system, the Hope will proceed to land here. There are 32 of us and 120000 of them... For the greater good, we must leave the comfort of this room."

At this time, the twenty soldiers had roused themselves and started to sort out their weapons while the remaining eight scientists were facing difficulties collecting themselves. These men of science were not trained to endure such harsh conditions,

so after twenty hours without sustenance, they were already at the early stages of debility.

As Ebon led the way, he was followed by Ying, then Liu Bai, and then the rest of the soldiers, the frontline squad moved towards the shuttle entrance. They were trailed by Zhang Heng, who was visibly reluctant to move from his position. After positions had been taken, Ebon kicked down the door, training his assault rifle at what laid beyond it.

And beyond the door was... nothing but a darkened desert. The weak light shining from within the shuttle revealed nothing but sand and more sand.

Everyone was sharply relieved, but even so, Ebon remained extremely alert as he led the way out of the shuttle door. Following him were the soldiers, Ying, and Liu Bai.

They came up with nothing after checking their surroundings for rogue prints in

the sand. "Looks like Zhang Heng was right after all," admitted Ebon with a chuckle.

After hearing that, the remaining soldiers gradually let down their guards. One of them was Chen Wei, who was particularly close to Ebon. Chen Wei walked up to Ebon's side, chiding laughingly, "You sirs are too strung up sometimes."

At that moment, Zhang Heng, who was just stepping out of the shuttle, yelled, "Watch out!"

Before anyone could respond, a few brownish, metal-like needles shot up from underneath the sand. They bored through the space suit and dug right into Chen Wei's body, lifting the unfortunate soldier into the air. Within the short span of two seconds, Chen Wei's body was mummified before everyone's shocked eyes...

His bodily fluids had been drained instantly!

Connected to those deadly needles was a seven-by-four-

meter-sized monstrosity that was shaking itself loose from the sand. The thing was paper thin, and with its coppery shell, it had the appearance of a metallic object. It had no visible appendages or exterior organs like a mouth or eyes other than the metal-like needles that grew out of its circumference.

The creature appeared to have become sluggish after its feast. It remained motionless after its attack on Chen Wei with the exception of the central part of its flattened body, which started to balloon up. It continued to expand for several seconds

before deflating. As it deflated, about ten creatures similar to it but much smaller in size scurried out of its underbelly.

These mini creatures leaped towards the party with surprising speed. In almost the blink of an eye, a few of the creatures stuck onto the two foremost soldiers. Even though attempts were made to swat them off, they adhered tightly to the spacesuits before lodging their needles into the victims within.

Compared to Chen Wei, these two soldiers had the unfortunate pleasure of experiencing a slow death. Amidst violent struggles and earsplitting screams, the two soldiers shriveled up while the creatures attached to their bodies grew bloated at an alarming rate. While the carnage was happening, the other creatures swiveled past the claimed victims, throwing themselves at other fresh kills.

"Fire! Fire!"

Ying's call to arms shook

everyone out of their stupefaction, then everyone started unloading their guns. There was no time or thought for neither scoping nor targeting; bullets were being sprayed aimlessly. It was a race for survival!

This was mankind's first encounter with an alien lifeform... and it certainly wasn't going to end well!

Chapter 27: The Landing of the Hope!

Just what kind of monstrosity was this?

A creature like this didn't feel like it belonged to reality, it was more like something from a horror story!

The thing was as flat as paper and noticeably lacked eyes as well as any other external organs which could be used to indicate its front and rear. The only

thing that differentiated it from being a flimsy paper was the needle-like apparatuses that grew out its periphery. These needles were exceptionally thin but nowhere near as fragile as a hypodermic needle. This was proven when it pierced through a heavily-padded space suit like it was nothing.

The element that propelled it to stuff of nightmares though was its "children," the mini versions of itself. These creatures were as small as a grown man's palm but could move as fast as lightning. Their incredible speed as well as their small size were huge

factors in helping them evade the bullet storm. Even though half of these creatures were taken down by the party's unceasing fire, around seven or eight of them managed to survive the hail of bullets and ended up attacking Ebon and a few other soldiers that were at the forefront.

At this moment, Ebon had a curious out-of-body feeling. It was as if the world had imploded upon itself. Every sound and diversion around him was drained with the exception of his own heartbeat and a visceral surge of hunger that was flying

towards him...

Yes, a visceral hunger, a hunger that could only be felt after years of starvation. It was an undisguised and unfettered feeling of hungering malice!

A strange sensation clouded Ebon's psyche right then. With a mind that was not his own, he dropped his assault rifle to swap for his pistol. He heard a voice telling him that the pistol was much more effective in close-range shooting. The rifle would have shaken too much, ruining

his aim.

Launching forward like a bullet, the small creatures were so fast that only the few highly trained scouts were able to catch their movements. To be able to spot them was, however, a completely different matter from being able to stop them. The creatures were already several meters away from their location when Ebon suddenly dropped his rifle.

Bang, bang, bang!

In the next instance, Ebon unloaded three rounds and three creatures burst in mid-air. Without taking a moment to breath, Ebon took a leap backwards, and not a moment sooner, a creature landed before his feet. Before it could recollect itself, Ebon gave it a relentless stomping.

The creature, dangerous as it was, was a newborn after all, so its shell hadn't had the time to harden. Unable to bear Ebon's weight, it was easily squished into a pulp.

The other four soldiers were not as lucky as Ebon. Their rifles were too unwieldy to take down the creatures that were closing in, so in a blink of an eye, the creatures latched onto the men's suits and deployed their needles. Amidst the men's helpless cries, the creatures bloomed from their initial palm size into something as big as a car tire, and they showed no observable signs of slowing down. The men slowly shrunk before everyone's eyes.

Taking no time to dally around, Ying shouted his commands. "Retreat! Everyone, retreat back

into the shuttle! That includes you, Ebon! Get back in here!"

Further away, the big creature's body ballooned up once more. Another dozen of its "babies" scurried out from underneath its belly as it deflated. The newborns floated across the sand towards the retreating party. Abandoning their victims that had already been completely sucked dry, the first batch of the creatures joined in the pursuit. Even though all of them were paper thin, the difference in size between the two batches was obvious; the newborns were still palm-sized

but the older group was already one meter wide and one meter long.

Even though the party was retreating, they had never ceased shooting as they were working to clear a path for their comrades. All of a sudden, Ebon let out an agonizing scream. Before everyone's eyes, the leg that he had used to stomp the small creature started smoking. It seemed like the creature's bodily fluids were incredibly corrosive. The toxin did a quick work on Ebon; before the man even dropped to the ground, his left calf had been wholly eaten

away.

At the same time, a few of the bigger "children" were still gliding towards the party. Ying and Liu Bai exchanged a look and then instinctively moved forth to rescue Ebon. As he was doing so, Ying felt an overbearing silence submerging his surroundings, rooting him to the ground. Within that silence, time slowed to a crawl and he found himself able to see everything with much greater clarity. Training his eyes on the big creature furthest away, he found himself with a clear vision of it, down to the patterns it had

on its brown shell. He had a complete visual of the panorama around him; from the sand lifted off Liu Bai's boots, to the bedlam behind him as people stumbled into the shuttle; from Ebon, who was crawling on his arms towards them, to the needles that the creatures were using as paddles to glide rapidly over the sand.

He was presented with a clear picture of everything around him with the option to zoom in at any location at will. Subconsciously, he dropped his assault rifle in exchange for the sniper rifle on his back. Without

the aid of a scope, he unloaded numerous rounds into the distance. The rate that he was firing at could be compared to that of an assault rifle. As the sound of gunfire came to a close, Liu Bai was already at Ebon's side. Shouldering Ebon's massive weight, both of them struggled towards the shuttle.

On the other hand, the few soldiers who were standing guard at the shuttle door as well as Zhang Heng, who had been shaking in fear, were in a complete daze because every round fired by Ying shot right through the centers of the many

one-meter-wide creatures. Every single one of them pirouetted for a few moments in the air before falling inanimately to the ground.

Ying himself was shocked by his marksmanship, but without allowing himself the time for shock, he ran towards Liu Bai to help him carry Ebon. As the three finally careened through the shuttle door, it slammed shut.

It was then that the party had the time to reflect over the

nightmare that they had just encountered. The cries of their friends and their mummified portraits were still vivid in their minds.

"...Are those aliens?" asked a shivering Zhang Heng in a timorous voice.

The question fell unto a quiet room with everyone still trapped in their abhorrent memories. The uneasy silence was shattered by Ebon's sudden moan of pain. Liu Bai immediately yelled, "Guys, help

me carry Ebon into the inner chamber, and remove his space suit!"

Everyone moved to heed Liu Bai's orders. After they removed Ebon's suit, the party was greeted with a nasty surprise. The place where Ebon's left calf was supposed to be was nothing but a stump that ended with a mess of bones, tendons, and blood vessels. On it still remained some of the acid, burning away and releasing an uncomfortable sizzling sound.

The seriousness of the prognosis was written all over Liu Bai's face. He uttered no words as he leaned to reach his medicine kit. After extracting a surgical knife from within it, he said, with much difficulty, "Ebon, old friend, hang in there and don't you dare fall asleep! You've lost a lot of blood and are seriously dehydrated, but I'm sure you can pull through. No matter what, just focus on my voice and keep yourself awake!"

An ashen-faced Ebon replied listlessly, "Do what you have to do. I know it's not my day today, so don't worry. The name's Ebon

for a reason; the life's as tough as its namesake."

Liu Bai turned to exchange a signal with Ying, who then walked over and inserted a part of Ebon's spacesuit into Ebon's mouth. Then Liu Bai sawed Ebon's infected leg. Pieces of muscle and bones fell off until there were no longer any sounds of corrosion. Liu Bai quickly retrieved a container with white powder from his kit and applied the powder over Ebon's leg. After that, he quickly bandaged it and moved to check up on Ebon.

True to his word, even without anesthetic, Ebon had endured through the surgery. He came out of it fully exhausted with barely any energy left to move a muscle.

One of the scientists broke free of their cowering huddle and went over to the spot where Ebon's discarded flesh had fallen. To his dismay, the flesh had sunken several centimeters into the floor. It was obvious how corrosive the creature's bodily fluid was.

"This is some strong acid. It's not blood but acid that flows through these alien creatures' bodies..." commented the scientist before turning to address Ying. "It's necessary to bring him back to the Hope to conduct a full blood test. This is the first time we come into contact with an alien species that could produce such a level of acidity. We can't remove the possibility of it containing latent toxins, so to be safe..."

Ying sighed. "That is easier said than done. If we could access the

amenities on the Hope, we wouldn't still be stuck here now..."

That squelched any semblance of hope present within the party. They were still hopelessly stranded on the planet, but they didn't have the monstrosities outside the door to deal with before...

Ying stole a glance at Zhang Heng and sighed as he said, "We have no supply of energy left, so the communicator is non-operational, but we have to stop

the Hope from coming here. Even if we all die, there will only be thirty-two deaths, but there are 120000 people on the Hope, including our families and friends. We must..."

Right then, a series of beeps issued from the shuttle's control panel, giving everyone a shock. As Ying rushed towards it, he asked Zhang Heng, "Is that communication from the Hope? Tell me!"

With a complicated expression, Zhang Heng replied, "No,

that's... it just means a shuttle is flying towards us; it's pinging us of their proximity through sonar relay. Plus, as you've said, we have no energy left, so the communicator can't even be powered up."

Everyone stared blankly at Zhang Heng, trying to wrap their heads around the words he had just said. Meanwhile, Liu Bai was caught murmuring to himself, "So a shuttle is flying towards us... According to a previous update, as long as they have proven the anti-gravitational system was indeed weakened by electrical

resistance, the Hope will..."

"The Hope will land here
soon?!"

Chapter 28: The Search!

It was a mixed bag of emotions when the expedition party found out about the possibility of the Hope landing on the planet soon. They were happy because this meant a greater chance for their survival, but they were also simultaneously worried because the landing would mean more innocent deaths in the face of those monsters!

Ying slammed his fist into the shuttle wall and gravely said, "We must reach that approaching shuttle and use its

communicator to warn the Hope!"

Ying's directive was met by a room of silence until Liu Bai spoke up. "Ying, calm down. First, you need to understand that it's night time right now. This planet doesn't have something that's akin to Earth's moon that can reflect the sun's light at night, so it's literally a world of darkness outside. And since we only prepared for a scouting mission that was supposed to last for three hours, we did not pack any lighting equipment. Furthermore...

"There's still those creature outside to worry about..."

At this juncture, Ebon said, in a shaky voice, "Those are indeed monstrous creatures. There is no chance for communication nor negotiation..."

Ying rushed to Ebon's side, peering at his struggling friend grimly before finally asking, "Those were some sick moves you demonstrated out there. Was it because of..."

It took him much effort, but Ebon grinned and replied, "It was an out-of-body feeling. Didn't you experience it as well? When I was in that condition, I could clearly sense that those creatures had no mental faculty nor sentient consciousness. Their only intention with regards to us was... to feast, or more specifically, to drink. There was a deep hunger for liquid in those creatures. They would risk their lives for even just one drop of water. Ying, don't go out there to go searching for that shuttle, and don't let your concern cloud your judgment."

Ying stood up, shook his head, and gave himself a loud slap, hoping it would clear his mind. He took a few deep breaths before continuing, "Yes, Ebon, you are right. I was in that condition as well, but mine was different from yours. I couldn't sense their consciousness; instead, I was gifted with a clear vision of my surroundings. It was as if I was seeing with my mind's eye, and no matter the distance, everything was crystal clear... It's hard to put the sensation in words, but it felt something like that."

Turning to the scientists, Ying resumed, "Everyone, I will now describe every detail that I've observed about those creatures. And I would like you to confirm how they detect our location."

Ying recounted everything he had noted about those creatures down to the smallest detail. His audience of scientists was rapt. As Ying finished his tale, the biologist among the group offered, "If you're absolutely certain that the creature has no exterior organs, including eyes, nostrils, and ears, then I am fairly certain that their needle-like apparatuses act as sensors,

probably highly sensitive ones at that. Like how echolocation works in bats, the needles are mostly used to detect surface vibrations."

Ebon, who was lying at the side interjected, "And water... I have a strong feeling that they are extremely attracted to water."

The biologist, however, shook his head. "We depend on scientific method and not intuition. We can't come to conclusions like that without any actual evidence..."

Surprising everyone, a scientist beside him added, "That might not be true. We may actually have the evidence to support his observation..."

The room turned towards this scientist. He was the lead meteorologist, the man who suggested that the planet's air was corrosive during the conference meeting.

He went on. "It is no secret fact that this planet having only a desert surface despite its young

age is a scientific mystery. Since we've ruled out the possibility of wind erosion and acidic corrosion, then it must have been caused by something else. This mysterious reason aside, the possibility that a species can survive on this planet where not a single trace of water could be found shouldn't be dismissed." Turning to the biologist, he continued, "As you should know, all carbon-based lifeforms require water to survive. Take us as an example, we would die without water. So, they're either like us or they are silicon-based creatures that don't require water to function. The fact that these creatures physically grow and reproduce after liquid

intake points to the simple conclusion that they need water. According to the theory of natural selection, all creatures evolve towards the direction that best helps them reproduce and survive. Contrary to what you have suggested, I believe that these sensory needles were the result of their evolution to aid them in triangulating water sources, not vibrations. They sense us through the water particles in our sweat and our breath."

The biologist was flabbergasted by the lead meteorologist's argument. It didn't take long for

him to cede his position. "Indeed, you are probably correct. However, that doesn't mean that I'm wrong, because those needles might be able to sense both water and vibrations..."

After the back-and-forth between the two scientists, Ying suggested, "If we were to put on the space suits and helmets and breath only the air within them, how long would we last?"

The room quieted down as everyone rushed off to give it a

test. The result was satisfactory. They found out that one could last about fifteen minutes in the suit before the air inside become overly saturated with carbon dioxide.

Liu Bai shook his head at this result. "It can't be counted this way. The rate at which we consume oxygen when we are standing still is drastically different from when we're moving or running. Ying, I understand where you're coming from, but we won't last more than five minutes trekking through the desert using only the air in our space suits. Five

minutes is the limit I'm giving; going on for more than that will only lead to suffocation and asphyxiation."

"Five minutes, you say?" pondered Ying as he paced the room, before finally stopping in front of Zhang Heng.

This gave Zhang Heng quite a shock. He quickly protested, "Please don't use me as an experiment! I'm so much less qualified than you people, and I haven't even had any formal military training!"

Shaking his head, Ying explained, "We're not going to use you for some twisted experiment... But Zhang Heng, I want you to tell me, remember before when Chen Wei stepped towards Ebon? Why did you yell out a warning then? I thought that the creature was still hidden beneath the sand at the time. There shouldn't have been anything you could notice that would prompt you to yell out that warning!"

Zhang Heng hesitated before answering, "You guys are

probably not going to believe me, but when Chen Wei took that step, I suddenly felt like the world had gone quiet. It was an eerie serenity, silencing all of your voices and gunfire. It was like the world had been peeled away. During that weird moment, my mind was blasted with a flash of prophecy. I could somehow tell that Chen Wei was going to meet his end in the next two seconds. It was a weird experience. Told you it was hard to believe."

Instead of confusion, which Zhang Heng was expecting, Ying appeared to be relieved. In a

serious tone, Ying told Zhang Heng, "I believe you. Even though you, myself, and Ebon have all gone through that mysterious experience, it was different for every single one of us. However, it was clear that we were in some sort of superhuman condition. Ebon could sense malicious intentions and respond accordingly, I was granted super vision, and yours... has something to do with divination. In any case, all the weirdness that happened has been explained.

"Everyone, I will now lay down my plans. After I finish, you can

decide whether you will follow me to go intercept that shuttle.

"First, we will leave this shuttle in the space suits. With the help of a timer, we will allow a change of air every five minutes. Zhang Heng, during these brief windows of vulnerability, I want you focus your attention. As soon as you can see those creatures approaching, yell out their direction... To make things uniformed and easy, use the clock as a direction indicator. For example, if the thing comes out from our northern side, you yell 'twelve o'clock.' Then, I'll try to reenter my superhuman

state to snipe those bastards!

"Listen, I know that the plan is foolish and rash... but I believe this is the best bet we have. Ask yourselves: are the lives of thirty-two really more important than the lives of 120000 people? We have to think of the innocent people that are on the Hope; we can't just send them to their deaths without trying our best to stop it.

"Dawn will come in about half an hour. Until then, make your decision whether to follow or

not..."

After that, Ying strode off to a corner of the room and slept. He even started snoring, not at all worried about the death mission that awaited him.

The rest of the soldiers were heavily conflicted. Zhang Heng opened his mouth multiple times, but actual words never came out... His intuition told him that if he dared to request a retraction of his involvement in the upcoming mission, Ying would personally shoot him

dead.

As dawn broke, a total of twelve soldiers volunteered to join Ying because these men had their children, wives, and parents on the Hope.

Liu Bai also decided to join Ying's operation. Without necessary medicine and facilities, there was no reason for the field medic to remain with Ebon. Even though some of the scientists had also volunteered to follow, Ying denied their requests. Ying was

given explicit orders to preserve the safety of these scientists before they left for the planet, so he was adamant that all of the scientists must stay behind in the shuttle.

Right as the small party stepped out of the shuttle entrance, Ebon, with the last bit of his energy, shouted, "FOR GLORY."

"OR FOR DEATH!" finished Ying and Liu Bai in unison as the pair led the way out into the open desert.

Chapter 29: Helpless

It was a life-or-death gamble!

The severity of the operation was clear on everyone's minds as they took their first steps out of the shuttle.

As the saying goes: to know your enemy is winning half of the battle, but for Ying's troop, there were simply too many unknowns about their adversary. They did not have the answer to simple questions like

how would these creatures know their location without the usage of conventional sensory organs like eyes or a nose? What they had were speculations. Speculations like they were tracing them through heat sensory, surface vibrations, or through the detection of water particles released by the human body.

Even with Zhang Heng and Ying's superhuman powers, the possibility of being wiped out was not far from everyone's minds. At the end of the day, they were still humans with vulnerable bodies. They were

not immune to damage, certainly not from needles that could literally suck the life out of man within seconds.

Ying's small group was made up of army holdovers from when the world descended into chaos. There were two Germans, one French, one British, two Americans as well as two Chinese. Not all of them were high-ranking officers in their original armies; some hadn't even gone into actual battlefields, but they were familiar with the basics of firearms and protocols. And because of that, despite

everyone's highly taut nerves, Ying's orders were still being closely followed. The group was further split into three units, one trailing behind the other. Zhang Heng, their human radar, was set in the middle.

Somewhere down the direction they were heading, a stream of smoke was billowing upwards. On that windless morning, it was a clear signal for the landing spot of the other shuttle. This saved them the trouble of scouting, but... the problem was that it was quite a distance away. A rough estimate of the time they needed to get to the shuttle

was about fifty minutes to an hour, meaning at least ten stops for changes of air. It was a literal walk of death!

Every member of the party, including Ying, was extremely distressed, and that made for faster consumption of the oxygen within the space suits. The member most affected by this was Zhang Heng. He had the least military training, plus it wasn't that long ago that he had his narcotic addiction cured. Understandably, compared to the others, he had the weakest physique.

It was Liu Bai who was the first to notice that Zhang Heng had gone considerably pale under his helmet. He immediately requested that the party pause as he rushed over to unlock Zhang Heng's helmet. He yelled, "Ying, we need to stop! Everyone, undo your helmets! We need a change of air!"

Frowning, Ying looked at his stopwatch. It showed that they had only moved for three minutes. He spoke no words, but his frustration and condescension were loaded in

the icy glare that he pointed toward Zhang Heng. In it was even a glint of menace.

Liu Bai, after picking up on Ying's stare, ran and kneed Ying in his stomach with the full force of his anger. Roaring, he said, "Just what the hell are you thinking?! Did you forget that he's a Black Star as well?! Put yourself in his shoes for one second, won't you? He hasn't received any formal training, so he doesn't have the endurance the rest of us have. What is wrong with that? Give him that look again and I'll gouge out those eyes of yours myself! The

rest of you! Didn't you hear me?
Take off your helmets!"

Ying stumbled a few meters back from Liu Bai's kick. Standing up, he sighed. "I'm sorry. That was my fault... Let's take a two minute break, then. But don't let your guard down. Zhang Heng, can you still access your heightened sense?"

A shivering Zhang Heng replied, in between desperate gasps of air, "I... I'm fine. I can still do that..."

“Good!” Ying nodded. Without an apology to Zhang Heng, he planted himself on the ground. Cradling his sniper rifle, he went as still as a statue.

After a while, Zhang Heng’s breath slowed and color returned to his face. Liu Bai strode to his side and handed him a black pill that he had removed from his medical kit. He said, “Here, keep this in your mouth. There will be an initial wave of bitterness, but it will pass... Zhang Heng, don’t take what Ying did to heart. He can be such an insensitive prick at times, but don’t worry, you’re

one of us now; no harm will befall you from any one of us.”

Zhang Heng nodded enthusiastically. Next, he worked to train his focus on his surroundings, hoping to return to that superhuman state. Nevertheless, other than the light that refracted off the sea of sand, there was nothing else he could perceive. He would try other possible methods, but since he had no clue how he had entered that state in the first place, this was the best he could do. Under the planet's sweltering heat and despite everyone's general state of

dehydration, they started sweating.

The two minutes passed in a blink of an eye. Luckily, the break was monster-free. There was hope that the operation might be finished without any encounter with those creatures. After all, this was a desert planet. There was a lack of sustenance to nurture any creature, especially one the size they encountered the day before. Perhaps there was only that one creature on this half of the planet, suggested some of the men.

After forty minutes of trekking with many breaks in between, the tip of the other shuttle appeared on the party's horizon.

There was a palpable atmosphere of joy because according to their calculations, they would be reaching the landing site of that other shuttle after only another four to five breaks. There was, however, one whose expression had soured among the air of celebration.

Ever since the incident with

Ying, Liu Bai had been keeping his eye on Zhang Heng. Zhang Heng was the junior of the Black Star Unit after all. When he saw Zhang Heng's face drop, he approached him and asked, "Are you okay? I know you're probably tired, but hang in there for a little bit more. There're only a few steps left to the other shuttle. I'm sure they brought food and water with them--"

Shaking his head, Zhang Heng interjected, yelling at Ying, "Ying! They are coming! From behind... six o'clock! And they are coming fast!"

Before panic had the chance to settle, Ying summoned everyone to their posts. “Ready your weapons! Backlines, stick to your positions. The rest of you form a line before them! Nice job, Zhang Heng... They’ll come from behind you say... Liu Bai, hand him a pistol. Zhang Heng, I want you shoot at the spot where you sense the danger is emerging from. It’s okay if you miss; just shoot at the general area!

Zhang Heng nodded as he took hold of the pistol thrown to him

by Liu Bai. With the weight of the pistol in his hand, he couldn't help but be reminded of the days he was practicing his marksmanship with Ebon on the Hope. Of all the Black Stars, Ebon was the one who treated him best, the one who made him feel like he was part of the fold. He suddenly felt teary-eyed, but he reigned himself in. Pointing his pistol forward, he tried to concentrate his foresight.

Unlike the sensation of malice described by Ebon, Zhang Heng believed that his foresight wasn't something that focused on the opponent's projected

malice. It was an act of divination or sixth sense, giving him a preview of the event that will happen next. Channeling the full range of his focus, he wouldn't dare to even blink for fear that he might miss warning someone of impending danger.

The party stood prepared for about two minutes under the glaring sun. Some of the men started to get dubious and impatient, but one look at Ying's and Liu Bai's austere expressions persuaded them to keep their opinions to themselves. Suddenly...

“There!” shouted Zhang Heng as he shot at the sand dune before them. Almost immediately, Ying raised his rifle. Within that moment, he could again feel the world shutting in on itself. He could see the sand granules that were blown by the wind down to the details on each granule.

Among the canvas of the shifting sand, he could discern an outline of the creature hiding within... It was something that looked like a gigantic yarn ball. In the middle of it was a

metallic-looking spherical object. Protruding from this sphere was a dense jungle of needles. It looked like a mutated, gigantic sea urchin.

Using its needles, it squirmed underneath the sand. It was a sight that was truly unpleasant!

“...here, no, here... no there!” mumbled Ying to himself. All of a sudden, a loud shot rang out of his rifle and he could see the electro magnetized bullet surging towards the creature before dislodging itself in the

spherical object. The ammo burst into fragments, splitting the creature from within. Ink-black liquid seeped from its body and almost instantly the area ten meters around it was corroded into a giant sinkhole.

Ying slumped into a kneeling position. As waves of fatigue swept over him, he felt a strong desire to sleep. The shot had taken too much out of him mentally.

Everyone else though started cheering with the exception of

one person. Zhang Heng hollered, “No, no... this corrosive acid is itself a form of liquid. I can sense more coming this way. It is a school of them this time. Their number is so high that I can feel their presence clearly even though they are still far away!”

That dampened the celebration immediately. The men had their doubts regarding Zhang Heng’s supposed power initially, but now, with the evidence before their eyes, they had no choice but to have full faith in him. And what he had just spelt was their doom.

Ying's loud command shot through the air of depression that hung over the party. "What are we still doing here, then?! Run! They are after this liquid, not us! Open your helmets to take in as much air as you can. We are going to make one last sprint! As long as we can reach the other shuttle, we will be safe!"

Ying's words rallied everyone into action. The group charged towards the billowing smoke. As Ying and Liu Bai ran past Zhang Heng, with a tacit

understanding that could only come from years of partnership, the pair half-carried and half-dragged Zhang Heng between them, supporting him so that he wouldn't lag behind.

Everyone ran towards the shuttle literally like their lives depended on it. Urging them on was a noise that sounded like a colossal creature slithering towards them from underneath the ground. No one was brave enough to turn and look! They all had their sights set on the shuttle before them!

Step by step... Their destination came closer and closer...

The first person to reach the shuttle slammed directly into its door with barely any time to slow down. After fumbling with the lock, he managed to get it open, then he lurched through the open door and fell flat on the floor completely drained. Soon after followed the rest of the group...

When Ying, Liu Bai, and Zhang Heng, who were holding up the

tail end of the party, fell through the door, they could clearly see a creature sliding towards. This creature was less than a hundred meters away. It looked like a snake, but instead of flesh and blood, it was made up solely of bones. It was at least twenty meters long, and as it glided over the surface of the sand, it looked just like a serpent stalking its prey, just a hundred times more devastating and scary.

Before the party could get a better look, Ying rushed to close the shuttle door. With the door firmly closed, Ying slid down to the floor, trying hard to catch

his breath.

Right then, a space-suit-wearing individual jumped out from inside the shuttle. Barely holding his rifle, he shook all over as he demanded the identification of the party. After he got a clear look at everyone present, he finally let out a sigh of relief.

It was Liu Bai who was the first to recollect himself from their death sprint. He urgently asked, “Are you part of the rescue team? Where is everyone else?

And is the shuttle's multi-frequency communication still functional?"

The soldier quickly unarmed himself, taking pains to salute Liu Bai. "Repor- reporting for duty, lieutenant, sir..."

"Cut the formalities and answer me!" demanded Liu Bai.

"N, no..." unexpectedly, the soldier started to cry. "Everyone is dead. They took the mini hovercraft out to survey the area

yesterday and I kept communications from here. They said that they were thirsty and then I could hear the sounds of them gurgling water. The next minute all I could hear were painful screams before everything went quiet... They are all dead out there... killed by aliens... who are going to pick us off one... by one...”

It would appear that the trauma of his teammates' horrific deaths and his subsequent confinement had caused this soldier to lose parts of his wits.

Exchanging a glance with Liu Bai, Ying said, in a calm and authoritative voice, “Soldier, calm yourself down! There are no vengeful aliens out there, it’s just... desert storms! Attention, soldier! Carry over some food and water, and then lead us to the multi-frequency communicator... Actually, never mind that. Come on, Zhang Heng, it’s time to get to work.”

Zhang Heng stretched himself up with much difficulty, but before he could steady himself, the soldier’s words sent him

sprawling back down to the floor.

“Water, yes, sir, water and food, I will go get them... But the communicator is broken. With the scientists’ modification to this shuttle, the extra voltage managed to support its anti-gravitational system, but the high voltage discharge also fried the shuttle’s main circuit board, disabling technologies like its navigator and communicator...”

Chapter 30: Search and Rescue

"Aligning the Hope to suitable planetary track. Preparing to enter the planet's ozone layer. Initiating third ship inspection...

"Inspection completed. Every installation accounted for. Initiating third data analysis...

"Data analytics completed. All operations normal. Beginning the Hope's descent in thirty

seconds. Counting down: thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight..."

Under the Hope's central mainframe's guidance, the ginormous spaceship began its decline onto the desert planet. The descent was slow with the support of the anti-gravitational system. This was to prevent the creation of high friction between the ship and the ozone layer, thus lowering the risk of the Hope crashing into an alien planet.

Residing in central command,

Yao Yuan was busy taking in updates that were pouring in and issuing his corresponding orders. Naturally, these orders were discussed with and approved by technicians and scientists in order to bring the best performance out of the Hope. Essentially, Yao Yuan was only there to read out the required orders at the right times.

"Initiate the first and second nuclear energy generators. Idle the third."

"Captain's order..."

As Yao Yuan sped through his list of orders, the Hope glided closer and closer to the planet's surface. The view of solid land attracted the 120000 people on the Hope to their nearest cabin window. It had been quite some time since the people aboard the Hope had seen solid ground. As the sea of burnished sand rose up to greet them, the general air of excitement hid an undertow of consternation.

The second shuttle had landed

on the planet about three hours ago. According to the data they received, an increase in electrical voltage could verily counteract the weakening of the anti-gravitational system. This meant that it was entirely possible for the Hope to land on the planet.

The issues of landing the Hope had been subsequently churned out in an emergency meeting among the ship's scientific community. A small margin still rejected the need for landing because they maintained that there were too many unknowns regarding the planet. It could be

incredibly dangerous. Nevertheless, almost ninety percent of the scientists voted otherwise. In their eyes, being a space fortress, the Hope was their best defense against the planet's threats. Furthermore, should the need arise, they could abscond from the planet using the anti-gravitational system because they had worked out the kinks that prevented it from working before. Their priorities should be to rescue the stranded members and dispatch an environmental survey unit. It was instrumental to know whether the planet housed valuable mineral supplies since minerals like uranium were pivotal to the Hope's survival.

All things considered, the scientific community had agreed upon the need to land. Yao Yuan had announced the ship's plan to land since then and they were now finally touching down on the planet.

"Thirty minutes are required to prepare for lift off?" Yao Yuan requested for confirmation as he went over the information that was handed to him by the ship's engineers. This data was compiled after the engineers had done the necessary evaluation on the Hope's energy circuits

and reservoir.

Because of its size, the accumulation of energy that was needed for levitation would always be a thorn in the Hope's side. There wasn't a field big enough on the planet for the Hope to gather sufficient speed for lift off. Even with the use of rockets, the propulsion force wasn't strong enough to support the Hope in vertical ascent. The only viable method was through the use of the anti-gravitational system. That was why Yao Yuan had been hesitant about landing the Hope for quite some time. If disaster were to befall the anti-

gravitational system, the 120000 citizens of the Hope would be condemned to life sentences on this planet.

Even though they had figured out the solution, to create a spike in the ship's voltage output still required quite a bit of time since it involved a series of voltage converters.

The engineers' evaluation reports confirmed that more than thirty minutes were needed for the Hope to charge the voltage needed to override the

resistance from the planet. For some reason, Yao Yuan felt an overbearing need to memorize this number of thirty minutes to heart. After that, he shifted to another report.

This other report was by a group of geologists. It was regarding the planet's surface compression. From the data given by the two shuttles, they managed to conclude that the landing locations for the previous two shuttles were unsuitable for landing the Hope. The sand layers were comparatively loose around those two locales, so they might

not be able to support the Hope's weight.

They had, however, identified a spot suitable for landing. It was one hundred and seventy kilometers away from the two shuttles. The geologists banked on this spot's higher altitude to signify that it had a firm underlying layer of rock.

Another item on the report was a proposal to send out an underground probing party once the Hope landed. This would help ascertain the location's

geological structure more clearly, thus preventing unnecessary geological disaster. It would also help in analyzing the planet's geological features and isolating mineral veins as well as water sources. In conclusion, a firmer understanding of the planet's formation would be gained... After all, such an anomalous desert planet didn't appear out of thin air. There were many mysteries in space, but as creatures of logic, humans believe that everything can be explained through logic, and this desert planet should be of no difference!

Truth be told, Yao Yuan had pretty much no clue on how to read the scientific reports handed to him, because he had had no scientific training. Nevertheless, he had a quality the scientists had found to be incredibly worth respecting and that was his willingness to listen. Just like how his men paid attention to him on the battlefield because he was the expert in combat and warfare, he felt it was his duty to extend the same amount of deference to the scientists in their fields of expertise.

As Yao Yuan scrutinized the

reports, he had a sneaking feeling that hiding within the pages was a disaster waiting to happen, but try as he might, he couldn't locate it. After all, landing something that was the Hope's size in a desert terrain did warrant an immediate geological survey. Despite his nagging feeling of dread, it was entirely logical. And thus, after much deliberation, he approved the proposal but not before issuing an accompanying injunction where the probing team had to be accompanied by three hundred armed soldiers...

This proposal of desert drilling

had attached with it a list of needed logistics. The amount of equipment and supplies asked was negligible because the Hope had quite a big hoard of those from its days on earth. What had Yao Yuan worried was the list of staff it required.

The list requested for three hundred plus engineers as well as one thousand and five hundred mining workers. This would be the first time a group of this size would be leaving the Hope in one go, and if something were to happen...

Fearful of their safety, Yao Yuan scribbled over the three hundred and wrote five hundred instead. With a sigh, he slumped back down in his seat, waiting silently for the Hope to touch the ground. His train of thought rounded back again to his sense of guilt.

"Ying, Liu Bai, Ebon, Zhang Heng, wait for me. This was my fault, my miscalculation; I swear I will get you men back safely!" Yao Yuan promised himself.

After ten minutes, the Hope

passed the fifty thousand meters threshold. There was a gentle shake that was felt all over the Hope as the ship made contact with the sandy ground. Under the Hope's weighty pressure, the sand showed initial signs of giving away before it finally and fortunately stopped. Everyone breathed a sigh of relief alongside the soft but safe landing. There was an overall sense of hope and joy because according to preliminary reports, this could very well be man's next home planet!

The mystery that shrouded the
desertscape before them

inspired an equal amount of fear and excitement among the citizens of the Hope. The people requested to step out of the spaceship. They wanted to breathe in the air of this new planet for themselves. Naturally, these were all denied because Yao Yuan had no intention of letting non-related personnel leave the safety of the Hope before they made sure the planet was secure enough to do so.

After about half an hour of preparation, the rescue party was ready. With the exception of Guang Zhen, who was ordered to hang back as acting captain,

every remaining member of the Black Star Unit was scripted into this party. Led by Yao Yuan, the party also included a hundred elite agents and five hovercrafts... These hovercrafts were too fragile to be given the modifications necessary to allow them to keep their anti-gravitational function, but even without the modifications, they were still speedy means of transport as they could still glide quickly over the sandy surface using their conventional floatation systems.

Before departure, Yao Yuan approached Guang Zhen. "Ol'

Wong, you're the most grounded among us all. So while I'm sorry you have to sit this one out, but you have to stay behind to look after the Hope. If there's any trouble, don't hesitate to contact me, but I'm sure you can handle it yourself because I have full faith in you."

Guang Zhen responded somewhat sullenly. "But why do you need to go? You're the captain, the captain that these 120000 people trust. You're the face of security for them, so why can't you stay and I lead the team instead?"

"Ol' Wong, you might not believe me... but I have a feeling that if you lead the team, you all will face incredible danger. It's not that I don't believe in your capability, but I've told you about this feeling haven't I? It is unreal, but it works best when heeded... It just feels right to have you garrison the Hope. Alright, that's everything I have the time to say. Ol' Wong, just wait here for our return with the complete Black Star Unit. They are still out there... I can feel it," said Yao Yuan.

Sighing, Guang Zhen conceded. "It's that damn feeling again, isn't it? Go ahead then, and don't worry, I'll keep watch over the ship while you're gone."

The pair of old friends bumped fists before Yao Yuan turned to join the rest of the rescue party who were already waiting by the hovercrafts. As Yao Yuan neared the party, he intoned, "Let's move out! We're going to go get our lost heroes!"

At the same time, a sizeable party was gathering at the other

side of the Hope. Adhering to Yao Yuan's order, it had five hundred soldiers, more than a handful of technicians and engineers, as well as one thousand five hundred civilians who volunteered to follow as general workers...

Chapter 31: Terror

Ever since the Hope landed on the planet, Yao Yuan had been getting increasingly bothered. It was an insidious feeling. It reminded him of his first field operation when he accidentally stepped on a landmine and could feel his body involuntarily freeze. It rendered him helpless.

Yao Yuan was certain that the planet harbored an unknown danger. Nevertheless, he chose not to voice his concerns out loud in fear of ruining overall morale.

The hovercraft journey was dominated by silence because most of the soldiers were too wrapped up in the discovery of the new planet. Many stationed themselves before the windows with some even taking the effort to videotape the scenery. Even though there was literally only sand, they were still exploring an alien planet. The joy of fresh adventure and exploration had the men shaking with excitement.

The men weren't technically putting up a disciplined front,

but Yao Yuan decided to cut them some slack. He knew that these men weren't all from the Black Star Unit, so he reminded himself to not hold them up to the same standards. If he were overly oppressive, it might breed resentment, and that could only be disadvantageous.

The hovercrafts travelled at a much higher speed than expected and before long, the crew could already see one of the shuttles rising out of the sand about ten kilometers away.

As they glided closer to the shuttle, a few of the unit captains appealed to Yao Yuan with a request. They wanted to remove their helmets and drink some water to help cool down from the heat. They argued that since the planet's atmosphere was reported to be similar to that of Earth's, it would not cause them harm if they were to remove their helmets.

Yao Yuan was surprisingly adamant about none of the crew removing their helmets, retorting that there still remained the eleven percent of the atmosphere that was

unidentified and that it could be latently harmful. Unlike the expedition party, who literally ran out of air, there was no reason for them to take unnecessary risk. Yao Yuan's verdict was for them to suffer through the heat.

There wasn't much of an uproar after Yao Yuan's refusal. That could be accredited to the fact that before they left, they had been given stern warnings by the scientific community to not inhale the planet's air unless absolutely necessary. The scientists had expressed concerns over the mysterious

eleven percent of the planet's air and were still conducting additional analyses on it back on the Hope. Until they could be sure that the air was one hundred percent harmless to the human body, the Academy had given an official statement that direct inhalation was discouraged to prevent possible complications.

It is worth mentioning that man's technology at the year 2029 has undergone certain changes when compared to how it was in the beginning of the twenty-first century. An example would be the introduction of

nano-materials. Materials like metal, plastic, glass, clay, and even textiles had undergone major improvements. Space suits of the twenty-first century that were bulky and difficult to move in had become something that was more akin to bodysuits following the advancement of nanotechnology. They were lighter, much more flexible, and had better heat insulation. Even the opening and closing of the helmets had become automated. All of these improvements in functionality were thoroughly showcased during man's full-scale exploration of the moon in the year 2020.

When they were still on Earth, Yao Yuan knew that these spacesuits would be invaluable assets to their mission, so he ordered his men to scour the American, Russian, and Chinese space centers to gather as many of these suits as they could. Before they departed for space, the Hope had almost 10000 of these spacesuits in storage.

Thanks to Yao Yuan's prescience, the crew in the hovercraft was all wearing this handy space-travel wear. A few minutes after the captains' request was rejected, Yao Yuan received an entreaty for

communication from the Hope.

It was issued by the Academy. They had finished their analysis on the planet's atmospheric components. Their analysis had confirmed that the atmosphere contained no traces of microbes and water. It was indeed similar to Earth's atmosphere if one were to ignore its mysterious eleven percent.

Since the mystery component was unlike anything mankind had discovered, the scientists had no point of reference. Their

analysis had to be conducted at an atomic structure level. The result of that analysis was the reason they called.

"...We have the result of the atomic analysis. It was unbelievable! It was made up of..." said the scientist with what sounded like crazed fervor in his voice. Even with Yao Yuan's basic understanding of chemistry, after hearing what the mystery component was made of, he could understand the fanatic way the scientist had reacted. It was indeed an impossible find!

"You're telling me eleven percent of the air contains metallic element?! How is that even possible?" asked Yao Yuan incredulously.

"Major, we have double-checked our results, so there is no mistake! We are as surprised as you are. Evidently, this planet's air is host to molecules that are large enough to support extensions of metal atoms. It is a mystery that we can't explain; it can only be described as one of the cosmos' peculiarities... Frankly, with our current

technology, even with access to its chemical composition, we are unable to engineer such a complex compound molecule!

"As you know, the air around us mostly consists of singular molecules like oxygen with two oxygen atoms and nitrogen with two nitrogen atoms. Even when they are compound molecules, they are chemically simple, like carbon dioxide with one carbon atom and two oxygen atoms. They have to be simple to maintain their gaseous state... We have never encountered a gaseous molecule that has a metallic atom... It's a miracle!"

Coaxed on by the fervor of the miraculous discovery, the scientist sounded like he was ready to launch into a long speech exclaiming the majesty of the great cosmos. Before he could do so, Yao Yuan interjected. "It is a miracle. We know too little about the cosmos to presume we could understand it all. The Academy can have all the resources it needs to pore over this discovery, but I just need to know, is this element harmful to man?"

The scientist quickly replied as

if shocked by the redundancy of the question. "Harmful? How could it be harmful? Even if the metallic elements are in a gaseous state, they are not elements that we have had no contact with. These are elements like zinc and iron; they are incredibly insoluble. Even if we were to breathe in this air for a whole day, the percentage of it that would get into our bloodstream may be even less than one percent of the total. The amount is too small to cause metal poisoning. In fact, inhalation of such trace amounts of metallic elements could help balance our body's chemical equilibrium. Since it is directly consumed through the air, its

effect might even be better than taking edible supplements. Therefore, major, it is my suggestion that we allow everyone to be exposed to this air immediately as its effect can only be positive. Thank God."

"Are we absolutely certain that it is safe? How do the Chrome ZH mice respond to being exposed to this gas?" asked Yao Yuan.

"You mean the genetically-modified mice created by the biology committee? Yes, I think

they were called Chrome ZH mice. They have double the metabolic rate of normal mice with only ten days life expectancy. We have indeed conducted experiments on a batch of these mice. After being exposed to this planet's air, they showed an increase in physical status. There were no side effects. That is why I was willing to make this communication, major. The Academy is certain that this planet's air is not harmful for human consumption. And that conclusion is backed up by one hundred and seventy biologists!"

Yao Yuan breathed a sigh of relief after hearing that solid confirmation. Before he closed communications, he said, "I am incredibly grateful towards the Academy for its hard work and dedication. Please relay this information to Lieutenant Wong. Inform him to open the Hope's air vents. It is time for the people to take in natural air and not the air filters' sanitized air!"

After that, he allowed everyone to remove their helmets, then everyone was handed one bottle of mineral water. Since they had been cooped up in their space

suits for an extended period of time, some of the men started chugging down water like they hadn't had a drop in days...

Yao Yuan too started unscrewing the cap of his bottle. At the moment right before he tipped the water into his mouth, he had a flash of premonition. It was intense but fleeting. It dissolved before he could catch what it was trying to communicate. He waited for it to return, but the feeling was gone. Shrugging it off, he started glugging the water.

The hovercrafts floated closer to their destination. A few minutes later, they would be expected to be right before the shuttle's entrance.

Right then, a sandstorm started swirling around the group. The storm gradually gathered around one of the hovercrafts, immobilizing it in its spot. Before everyone's eyes, a giant skeletal "flower" bloomed underneath the hovercraft. It stretched its bony petals towards the captive hovercraft before closing in on itself, dragging its victim down into the sandy depths.

A few seconds later, the skeletal "flower" reemerged in full bloom. Following a blinding explosion originating at the center of the "flower", the taken hovercraft, or what was left of it, was ejected into the air before raining down in pieces of waste metals ...

Chapter 32: Deliverance

When the gust of the sandstorm started gathering, Yao Yuan's senses were practically singing. He could feel a strong surge of malice coming their way. It was pure and unadulterated. There was no hidden agenda; it just wanted to eat.

The feeling of malice was so intense that it knocked Yao Yuan off his feet. He could see the room spinning as he went down. Before he lost consciousness completely though, he bit down

hard on his lower lip. The shot of pain inspired a moment of lucidity, and Yao Yuan managed to rally himself off of that. Pulling himself back from the brink of collapse, he was granted a closer look of their adversary.

The skeletal flower was most probably a crustacean because its every surface, from its bony petals to the stalk it grew out of, was covered with a hardened shell. The scariest aspect though was its size. Standing upright, it stretched to at least a hundred meters tall, while it covered almost twenty meters from one end of its bud to another. When

it was in bloom, it would grow even bigger. That could explain the ease with which it engulfed one of the hovercrafts.

The hovercraft wasn't a completely organic object. Its engine probably exploded when it came into contact with the creature's digestive juices. The blast shredded the bud into pieces. Black ooze was flung around as the stalk started spasming crazily like a man losing his head. They knew that the ooze was highly corrosive, because the moment it hit the ground, the affected area melted. The creature's demise

pocked the ground around them with craters of all sizes.

The hovercraft closest to the flower was showered with a healthy dose of its vile liquid which ate through the metal like butter. Even the people within were not spared. The acid was so highly corrosive that the hovercraft's unlucky passengers didn't have the time to respond before they were melted off. It took less than three seconds for the hovercraft with all of its carry-ons to be completely disintegrated.

“Move away! Steer the hovercraft away from that liquid!” Yao Yuan yelled. “Keep your helmets on; this gas might be toxic too!”

Yao Yuan’s command tore the operators of the three remaining hovercrafts out of their shock. They immediately steered the hovercraft away from the general trajectory of the liquid spray. The rest of the people quickly switched on their helmets. They ran to investigate the spot where the explosion had occurred, but it was shrouded behind a wall of acidic fog.

Two hovercrafts, the lives of forty soldiers, and four Black Stars were lost in the blink of an eye. It showcased how truly fragile humanity was amidst the wide cosmos...

Staring at the toxic mist, Yao Yuan was at a loss for words. What was solid barely a minute ago was now a cloud of roiling gas. Out of nowhere, he heard a shot of gunfire from the shuttle. Using a pair of military-grade binoculars, Yao Yuan could see a person waving two makeshift flags by the shuttle.

Yao Yuan quickly
communicated to the two other
hovercrafts, “There are people
stranded on the shuttle and
those are the people that we’ve
come to save. Be on alert, but
move the hovercraft towards the
shuttle.”

Fear was written clearly on the
soldiers’ faces. They would be
eaten alive by another one of
those flower creatures if they
absconded from the hovercraft.
A few of the soldiers even
started yelling dissention,
refusing to risk their safety for

others. Faced with such open opposition, Yao Yuan's expression turned darkly serious. Abandonment of orders was no longer a misdemeanor but a heavy offense. Reading Yao Yuan's expression, all of the Black Stars stood ready to step in should things continue to escalate.

At that moment, a unit captain came forth with a message. "Major, it doesn't appear like the person was waving the flags for no reason. It is incredibly probable that he was a Navy SEAL and is communicating with us through semaphore!"

This threw Yao Yuan for a loop and he quickly returned his attention to the person waving the flag. Hurriedly, he asked, "What is he trying to say? Can you translate?"

The captain hesitated before replying, "I will try my best, major. But semaphore is normally used to signal situations at sea, so this might not make any sense... He is repeating four signals. First, dangerous carriage; second, cease your intention; third, danger ahead; and fourth, diving

operation under progress, so keep distance.”

Yao Yuan waved one of the nearby soldiers to bring him a piece of paper. As the captain went through the meaning of the man's flag signals, he jotted them down. When he finished, he turned to the captain and said, “Thank you, captain. Please continue to keep an eye on the soldier. If he signals something different, please let me know.”

Yao Yuan sat studying these

four phrases. The stranded soldier had taken much pain to sign these four terms over. They were within minutes from the shuttle, so these terms had to be of great importance if the soldier couldn't wait the few minutes to tell them this in person.

The problem was that Yao Yuan couldn't understand what they were trying to communicate...

The first was dangerous carriage. Did carriage mean the people on the hovercrafts or on the shuttle? But wouldn't it be

weird to refer to people as carriages? Or did it mean something else...

Second was to cease your intention. Was it telling them to cease moving towards the shuttle? Could the shuttle be a trap set by waiting creatures? Were the planet's creatures so calculative in nature? Yao Yuan had his doubts.

One thing was clear though; however, before he could figure out what these terms meant, they should not be engaging in

any operation recklessly. With that in mind, he shouted through the communicator, “Stop movement of all hovercrafts. Stay idle but be on alert!”

Without taking the time to address others’ responses to his shifting order, Yao Yuan turned back to his thoughts. The third was danger ahead. Did it refer to the flower creature that attacked them or did it mean the person inside the shuttle would be a source of danger to them?

The last was the most curious of them all: diving operation under progress, so keep distance... It made absolutely zero sense. They were in the middle of the desert; how could there be a pool of water for a diving operation...

(Diving... water... Wait, water!)

Yao Yuan suddenly jumped out of his seat and shouted through the communicator, “Do not remove your helmets! I repeat, do not remove your helmet! Seal every bottle of water there is and

do not open a single one! Also, operators, please resume movement towards the shuttle.”

(So that’s what the four signals mean. The word carriage wasn’t referring to people but the water that they carried. Secondly, it isn’t the intention to reach the shuttle that needs to be ceased but rather humans’ basic intention to drink and breathe. When the first two meanings are made clear, the third easily reveals itself. The danger wasn’t about the creatures but the water that attracted these creatures. The fourth could only be hinting at the location these

creatures will appear from.)

With the meaning of the signals made clear, everything else started to fall into place. Yao Yuan had been wondering why they were suddenly attacked when they had been travelling incident-free for so long. He reflected that the attack took place right after he gave his crew permission to remove their helmets and to drink water!

(It is water then that attracted these creatures?!)

Yao Yuan's rumination was cut short because they had neared the shuttle. As they walked in, they were greeted with the tired faces of the stranded expedition party. There were eight scientists, Ebon, who was in a state of coma from amputation and blood loss, Ying, Liu Bai, Zhang Heng, and the remaining soldiers who had returned from the second shuttle as well as... a flat, spindly alien carcass that was two to three meters in size.

“Bring it back to the Hope for autopsy,” said Ying when he saw Yao Yuan walk through the door. Pointing at the alien carcass, he

continued, “Its noxious body fluid has been drained, so don’t wor-” before he could finish, Ying slumped to the floor. Entering the superhuman state had taken a serious toll on him and he had been holding on through the sheer power of his will, but right then, he had reached his limit.

All of this took Yao Yuan by surprise, and amidst the general confusion, he had forgotten to remind the Hope about his new findings regarding the planet’s dangerous creatures. And so, while they were distracted in the shuttle, Guang Zhen had obeyed

his order to open the Hope's air vent.

And through it, a large amount of water particles wafted out to the planet...

At the same time, the geological surveillance unit departed from the Hope. Their destination was a decline about twenty kilometers away from the Hope. They intended to start a drilling operation there, hoping to use the data that they would find to unveil the mysteries surrounding this desert planet...

Chapter 33: Deadly Greens

Jay was tired and sick of everything at this point.

Since he got onto the damnable spaceship, he had been infected by a mysterious virus, tormented by high fever, and thrown into one-month-long quarantine. He never thought that he would say this, but during that period, he even missed the times he was locked in jail, because then he at least had an inkling of what was happening.

Tragedy, however, didn't end there. A few days after he was released from quarantine, he was requested to attend a series of meetings with the military and people's representatives where he was bombarded with questions regarding his academic standing. He knew that it was a matter of time before he would be found out, so he decided to come clean in the hopes of getting a less severe punishment. Before he could do that though, some emergency came up and the authority had left him alone. He felt immensely relieved following that, but his elation didn't last

long. Call it karma because this time his fake doctorate had landed him in a much bigger pickle than he could have possibly imagined.

The Hope was gathering personnel for a geological surveillance unit. This unit would be responsible for conducting an analysis of the geological structure around the Hope's landing zone. This was to find out whether the area would pose any danger to the spaceship and its citizens. Thanks to his doctorate, Jay was recruited into this unit.

Obviously, the unit's mission was incredibly important; 120000 lives depended on the result gathered by this unit. It was considering their mission's importance that Yao Yuan allowed this unit to venture out of the Hope before the military had the whole planet secured.

Of course, Yao Yuan wasn't going to send the unit out into the great unknown desert without protection. After all, the unit consisted of technicians, scientists, and engineers; these were invaluable assets to the

Hope. Therefore, the unit was accompanied by five hundred soldiers and a fleet of hovercrafts to ensure their safety. Furthermore, the location that they were heading to was only twenty kilometers away from the Hope. The hovercrafts were there for expedient transportation of materials or for a quick retreat.

And that was how Jay was roped into this conundrum. Before he boarded the Hope, he had spent days thinking about the perfect doctorate to give himself. To prevent an ugly unraveling of his lies, he needed

to find a field where his knowledge would not be tested. Subjects like chemistry, biology, physics, and astronomy were definitely out. Even courses like translation, resource management, and economics were unsuitable.

After much deliberation, Jay decided on geology.

They were, after all, going to space, a place where there would be no land. What use would a geologist be in space? Or at least that was what Jay thought back

then.

Now things couldn't be worse. Thanks to his fake doctorate, he was requested to join this geological surveillance unit as a team leader. He would lead the prospecting team and would be personally responsible for analyzing the minerals they would mine.

Amidst the general air of excitement that surrounded him as they walked towards their destination, Jay was an isolated bastion of gloominess. He was

full with lamentations of how harshly fate had treated him. Suddenly, a hand nudged him on his shoulder. Jay swept around and was greeted by a girl's grinning face.

"Eh? It's you! Your name is..." stunned, Jay had difficulties placing a name on the familiar face. But he was sure this girl was the person he was talking to when he fainted a few weeks ago, the girl who needed his help gathering some water.

"The name's Feng Xiao Chen,"

the girl supplied, pointing cheekily at herself.

"Wait, didn't you tell me your native language was French? Why do you have a chinese name now?" enquired Jay.

Xiao Chen explained, "You're still as ditzy as ever! Don't you know that they are going to formalize chinese as the Hope's official language? People are going to give themselves chinese names sooner or later, so I opted for the sooner! Come, repeat after me: Feng Xiao Chen!"

Shaking his head, Jay replied, "Fine... Feng Xiao Chen, is it? By the way, why are you here? Isn't the Hope on lockdown? Other than the surveillance unit and rescue party, no one is allowed out. So how did you sneak your way here?"

Feigning offense, Xiao Chen mockingly scolded Jay, "Who are you saying snuck here? I walked alongside this unit openly, okay? For your information, I speak multiple languages; without me, who is going to translate for you bunch of unilingual dummies?"

Pointing at her collar, she added, "Lookie here! See, I'm wearing a yellow first-grade badge."

The surveillance unit was a hastily constructed unit with members who didn't know each other personally, so there was general confusion in determining people's assigned roles. To rectify this, a few engineers designed a set of color-coded badges. These would be used to easily signify one's rank and role. The reds were the highest ranked; these were the scientists and engineers. Following them were the yellows; the technical workers

and a handful of translators. After that, the team leaders wore green and the remaining general workers had grey.

Jay was more than a bit annoyed to have this girl of only seventeen or eighteen parade her yellow badge before him. It was a bit hard for him to stomach that she was of a higher hierarchy than he was when she was so much younger than him. Swallowing his anger, he teased, "Fine, you're the boss. As a matter of fact, is there anything I can do for you, madam?"

Laughing haughtily, Xiao Chen said, "Not at the moment, but do not stray from your post beside me because I might need your help at any moment. I heard that the minerals we're collecting as samples are quite heavy. You can help me carry those."

Jay wanted to turn around and leave, but he suddenly had a fit of inspiration. "Sure, a ten kilogram load will easily crush a girl like you, and I'm sure those rocks are heavier than that. How about I carry those samples for you while you go around translating stuff for people?" suggested Jay nonchalantly.

Grabbing Jay's hands, Xiao Chen tried to hide her appreciation as she narrowed her eyes at him. "You yourself suggested that, so no backsies! You are now my lackey and will be helping me carry everything that is heavy."

Feigning reluctance, Jay complained, "I'm okay with it, but how about my assignment? If my superiors find out, I will be dead."

"To hell with them!" Xiao Chen

giggled, catching herself swear. "This is volunteer work after all. It's not like you're abandoning work, you're just assigning yourself a different role, so why care about them? So, go get me a bottle of water right now, lackey number one. I'm incredibly thirsty."

Making no signs to move, Jay shrugged, "Can't help you there. All of the supplies have been sent to the destination beforehand. I heard that the military is setting up camp there now as we speak. If you're that thirsty, then move faster."

Seemingly satisfied with his justification, Xiao Chen nodded obediently. Suddenly, she took off running, but not before dragging Jay along. As Jay was pulled along, he could hear Xiao Chen laugh. "Then let's move! We're not moving fast enough! Faster! Faster! Now I can't wait for work to start..."

"Wait, wait! Are you crazy? You're going to make me trip..."

The pair ran ahead of everyone else, trailing shrieks and

laughter. In everyone's eyes, based on their intimate interactions and banters, this pair of rosy-eyed young girl and dashing young man was an obvious couple. Witnessing love blossom always brought a warm, fuzzy feeling to one's heart, and that was especially true considering their situation. It told them that even after everything man had been through, the legacy of love would survive.

That brought hope for their future, a future where this barren desert would be terraformed after they find a water

source. With hard work and dedication, they could see this being man's second home planet!

Everyone felt lifted by a surge of inspiration and their steps quickened...

At that moment, back in the Hope, Guang Zhen had just ended transmission with Yao Yuan. There were three main points of communication. First was Yao Yuan reporting that they had indeed located the stranded survivors. A bit of bad

news was that Ebon needed immediate medical attention when they transported him back to the Hope.

The second was a warning about the planet's dangerous organisms. Yao Yuan said that they were still unclear as to how these creatures could detect human presence, but speculation pointed towards water. They were transporting a carcass of such an alien creature back to the Hope as well, hoping the biologists on board could get more information out of it.

Lastly, Yao Yuan wished for the Hope to not stay grounded. He also wanted Guang Zhen to recall the geological surveillance unit, but that was a lost cause. They had departed hours before Yao Yuan remembered to contact the Hope. They were probably beginning the process for excavation by the time Yao Yuan called.

After Guang Zhen got off of the call, he immediately issued an order for the Hope to lift off. The engine room heeded his order and started to charge the ship's anti-gravitational system.

However, the system couldn't be powered on for some reason...

On the outer wall of the Hope's base, numerous small tendrils were tangled up in the gravitational system's circuit. They appeared to be draining the system's electricity while simultaneously eroding it...

At the same time, at a spot twenty kilometers away from the Hope, in a small encampment, people were busy

working. In the middle of the encampment were a few giant drilling machines. They were poised to dig through the desert's surface layer.

However, the operation wasn't going so well. For some reason, when the drill bits hit a depth of about two hundred meters, their power would suddenly become dry. It was the same with all the machines. This had the scientists and technicians present scratching their heads. Without any other solution, they ordered the bit to be retracted to have it checked to see what exactly it had come into contact

with.

When the bit was lifted above ground, its surface was enveloped in a thick, green layer of something similar to moss. However, unlike moss, these green organisms adhered to the surface of the drill by ways of tendrils. It would appear that these green organisms were the culprits that were draining the drills of their energy. What was more horrifying was that with a speed that was observable to the naked eye, the bit was slowing dissolving before everyone's eyes...

The green organisms were draining and "eating" the drill bit! As the bit shrunk, bits of sand continued to fall off from the thick layer of the green organisms...

Chapter 34: Smoke and Mirrors

Sitting in the hovercraft, Yao Yuan was feeling incredibly down; there was even a shred of fear mixed in.

How could he have forgotten to contact the Hope? And it was not only he alone; the whole fifty plus member crew had forgotten as well!

This was where the fear sprung from. It was tolerable if only a

small handful of people had forgotten this important detail, because humans weren't robots with photographic memory. But to have all fifty plus of them lapse on this information...

That was scary!

It seemed implausible, but Yao Yuan concluded that they were all somehow lulled into this forgetfulness. How else was one going to explain this weird phenomenon?! Then again, Yao Yuan thought to himself that perhaps it was trauma from

their brush-in with the skeletal flower that had pushed the need to contact the Hope out of their minds.

Yao Yuan kept going back and forth between the two arguments. He deeply believed that there was a malicious force at hand that had dulled their memory, but he couldn't find any actual evidence of such a threat. And perhaps that was the biggest threat of all...

As the chinese idiom goes: it is easy to dodge the spear in the

open but hard to avoid a stab in the dark. It was always the hidden attack that would prove to be the most fatal. And Yao Yuan just couldn't shake the feeling of being observed.

(Calm yourself down, Yao Yuan. It's no use crying over spilled milk. You need to clear your mind and slowly go through the clues again.)

Heeding his own advice, Yao Yuan took a deep breath. The pure oxygen siphoned into his helmet had a strangely calming

effect as he started revising everything that had happened.

First, about one month ago, the Hope spotted this terrestrial planet. It was also the only planet the Hope could reach with its limited supplies and technology.

Then, the Hope charted its way towards this planet. In that period, the ship was ravaged by a mysterious virus, killing one hundred and two of the total five hundred plus patients.

This virus left as suddenly as it came. After the initial wave of sickness, there were no diagnoses of similar cases again. Treated as one of the cosmos' many mysteries, the incident of Virus X had since been relegated into the central mainframe's historical storage.

After that, the Hope successfully entered the planet's orbit. To gather initial surveillance, a few automated probes were released onto the planet. The data gathered wasn't complete enough to warrant a landing of the Hope, so Yao Yuan dispatched an expeditionary

team which comprised of Ying, Ebon, Liu Bai, and Zhang Heng as well as some soldiers and scientists.

The lackluster performance of the probes was to be expected because they were inferior to actual galactic probes like the ones used on Mars.

The reason for this was simple: their creators were, to put it simply, slim pickings after the governments had done their rounds. They were not specialists; there were only a few

handfuls of them that had contact with space technology before this. Naturally, their proficiency would grow with practice and time, but for this first planet, their creations were understandably less than satisfactory.

For this reason, Yao Yuan had convinced himself and the Hope that an expedition group was necessary... Personally, he felt that the ship needed hope from a successful operation, but now he started to have doubts.

The Hope's storage of energy would allow for four additional space-warps. Their cache of supplies and the sixth floor biomes could provide enough sustenance to ensure at least ten years of survival for the 120000 people in space, a period that could be drawn out with systematic rationing.

The point was that the Hope wasn't in dire need of landing. It would actually be more beneficial to use the extra time to conduct a more thorough analysis of the planet. He shouldn't have been so rash in his decision to dispatch the

expeditionary unit and to order the landing. But weirdly enough, when these momentous decisions were made, even with Yao Yuan expecting it, there were no voices of objection from the Hope's citizens. It was as if the whole of the Hope was of one mind, and that mind was Yao Yuan's...

(Could this be the source of the problem?!)

Yao Yuan sat up straighter in his chair. He was suddenly reminded of an operation he was

given years ago. It required him to assassinate an international spy. Due to the mission's covert nature, only Yao Yuan and the female leader of the Hidden Dragon squad were involved. The two of them were hot on their target's trail, but at a pivotal point, they were diverted off track.

It was thanks to a coincidence that they managed to complete their mission. It was only after the target was eliminated that Yao Yuan knew that the spy was incredibly well-versed with psychology and hypnosis. Through the use of colors,

words, conversations, and even interior design, he could subtly implant suggestions in people's minds, swaying them into making certain decisions.

He had learned from the spy something called self-serving bias. Even when man was found to be in the wrong, he would be reluctant to admit mistakes and would instead twist the reality in such a way that the mistakes were found to be logical and intended. Yao Yuan had discovered that this psychological bias could be enhanced through suggestions. It was like what was happening

to him then; instead of admitting that he had made some impetuous decisions, he kept telling himself that the moves were necessary because the people on board needed to witness immediate action and hope...

In other words, could it be that he, alongside the 120000 on the Hope, were under the influence of hypnosis?!

"Connect me to the Hope," ordered Yao Yuan as he sprang up from his seat.

Call it a coincidence, but at that moment, the panel that indicated a communication from the Hope beeped. Yao Yuan quickly grabbed the communicator and asked, "What's happening, Ol' Wong? Why the sudden need for communication?"

In an uncharacteristically frantic voice, Guang Zhen explained, "Ol' Cap'n, we've stumbled into an emergency..."

In an unceasing stream of

information, Guang Zhen relayed to Yao Yuan every worrying report that he had received. The Hope's service team had found some type of green organisms attached to the ship's underbelly. They were rapidly draining the Hope of its reservoir of energy. Furthermore, the geological surveillance unit had reported stumbling across similar green organisms. They said that these green organisms appeared to be only attracted to the drills' metallic parts. They also added that when the organisms finished draining the stored energy, they would start digesting the metal itself. Through some unknown

process, the digested material would be converted into sand... In other words, when the organisms finish sucking the Hope's energy dry, they would start feasting on the Hope itself!

The thought of that prospect had Yao Yuan shivering with dread. The Hope was literally the hope of 120000 people! If they were stranded on this planet... there would only be death!

And not death of old age but death by the hands of those

creatures! After losing the Hope's protection, it would be a matter of minutes before the 120000 people were completely sucked dry!

The thought of that harrowing scenario spurred Yao Yuan into asking, "How about those monsters? Other than the green organisms, have there been sightings or attacks from those creatures?"

"That is indeed the weirdest thing. I've not received any such reports from the Hope's patrols

nor from the geological surveillance unit," answered Guang Zhen.

These green organisms, probably the planet's flora, consumed electricity and metal to produce sand...

The planet's fauna, on the other hand, had a highly corrosive bodily fluid and an unfettered desire for water...

Yao Yuan swore that there was a link tying these two facts

together... A link that could perfectly explain why the planet was completely covered with sand, why the whole of the Hope was so hasty in their decision to land on this planet, and why the alien creatures hadn't attacked the Hope and the geological encampment... The insight was deliciously close, but every time Yao Yuan felt close to understanding it, it floated away...

In the meantime, on the other end of the communicator, it sounded like Guang Zhen was getting briefed on another report. After about ten seconds,

Guang Zhen added rapidly, "This is bad, Ol' Cap'n. That was the latest report from the geological unit. After the green organisms finished their work on our drills, they fell off and disappeared underground. Soon after that, the camp was attacked by alien monsters. The accompanying army has constructed an emergency garrison, but they won't hold out much longer. The reports of deaths and injuries are increasing. What am I to do now? Should I send out reinforcements?"

With that information, Yao Yuan could see everything

falling into place; he could see the big picture now. Calmly, he called into the communicator, "Hold the reinforcements. Tell the geological unit to pour all the water they have into the ground. After that, have everyone wear their space helmets and retreat. Make sure no one carries any water with or on them. Do not let them open their helmets until after they have reached the Hope. Remind them to move fast!" Yao Yuan paused before adding, "Ol' Wong, are you familiar with the concept of the hive mind?"

At the other end of the

transmission, Guang Zhen was busy relaying Yao Yuan's orders. Being asked such a question apropos to nothing, he answered somewhat confusedly, "You mean like with bees and ants[1]?"

"No... never mind then. Remember to tell the Hope's biologists to stand at the ready. After an autopsy on this alien carcass, everything will be clear, and the mystery of this planet will be unveiled..."

And if I'm not mistaken, these

green organisms..."

Instead of examples from natural world, the author used human example like workers' union. The meaning is the same: referring to group consciousness.

Chapter 35: The Autopsy

Around three in the afternoon, Earth's time, the Hope came across Planet Sahara's (unofficial name) native plant life. It was a moss-like organism that was green in color and was made out of many individual units. Each unit, the size of a sand granule, was a host to a bunch of tendrils that served two purposes. One, they were used to bind to one another to gather into a large mass. Two, they could hook onto metallic surfaces to drain them of their power. After the power was fully drained, the tendrils would start breaking down the metals into sand

particles.

At 3:05 PM, the geological surveillance unit's drills were besieged by the green organisms. After draining and dissolving the drill bits, they disappeared underground.

Later, at 3:08 PM, the unit was ambushed by alien creatures. Paper-thin creatures and urchin-like creatures led the first wave of the attack. It resulted in 73 deaths and the survivors had to retire into the more secure inner camps. Not long after that, they

received the order to immediately return to the Hope, but it was already too late for that as they had already been boxed in by the alien creatures. The larger group of the unit¹ with 2,400 people was luckier in the sense that they weren't close to the drilling site when the creatures attacked. Their number was high enough that they could barrel through the onslaught and turn back to the Hope.

At 3:11 PM, Yao Yuan returned to the Hope with the rest of the rescue crew. The number of casualties reported by geological

unit A had risen to 107, and they were still heavily surrounded by all sorts of weird-looking alien creatures. However, they did notice that after everyone had retreated into the inner camps, a general state of inactivity seemed to fall over the alien creatures. It appeared that they were already wrung out from their initial assault.

Hoping to take advantage of their lethargy, a soldier volunteered to carry out Yao Yuan's order to go empty their supply of water at the middle of their campground. The moment the water hit the ground, there

was a visible change among the alien creatures; they swarmed towards the spot in a frenzy. The carnage was so horrendous that the soldier who was caught in the fray was torn into a mess of guts and marrow within seconds. As unfortunate as the whole thing was, they did come to a conclusion. Other than the ability to detect water particles, the alien creatures were able to detect other signals, and that they weren't so ferocious in the absence of water.

There were also updates from group B. Even without removing their helmets and after

disposing of all their water supply, the band of alien creatures trailing them didn't stop growing in size. As they drew closer, they also got increasingly more savage. This showed that contrary to what they believed, these creatures, or at least some of them, had learning capability. They had learned that underneath the space suits was a rich source of water...

This was the conundrum facing Yao Yuan. Two teams needed immediate attention or they might not see the end of the day. On the other hand, the amount

of green organisms under the Hope had increased exponentially. The engine room calculated that they only had six hours left before their energy ran out!

Yao Yuan didn't have much time left...

“I understand, we have six hours left,” Yao Yuan said, after listening to all the updates and reports. He immediately gathered the Hope's chemists, genetic engineers, biologists, and pathologists to hand the

alien carcass over to them.

“This is the only perfectly preserved alien carcass we have. I want you all to conduct an autopsy immediately. Also, I’ve heard that studies have been done on the plant draining the Hope of its energy. Has there been any result?”

The 100 plus scientists Yao Yuan was addressing had anxiety written all over their faces. All of the specialized districts, the Academy, the Workshop, and the Barracks had

been given news of the Hope's situation, so they knew conditions were dire.

One of the biologists came forth to answer. "Yes, major. We have taken samples of the green lifeform. We found out that the plant can consume anything be it metal, plastic, glass, or clay. That's why we are having problems containing it. It eats through everything and leave us with sand. The only solution is to use electrically-charged containers, but we realized that electricity induces mitosis in these organisms. They grow in size through absorption of

energy, and when that's done, we're left with more of these organisms, and then they eat through everything again."

"Acid!" interrupted Yao Yuan. "Only strong acid can resist being consumed by these plants."

"Acid?" Most of the scientists were understandably incredulous. but since it was the best, if not only, suggestion they had, some of them retreated from the room to start conducting more experiments.

More and more groups of scientists left the small conference room after they received the alien carcass from Yao Yuan until only a few biologists remained. These were all respected biologists with at least half a century of experience in their field, and Yao Yuan issued them a question. “Sirs and madams, I’ve asked you to remain because I have a question that only your group can answer... do you believe plants can be sentient?”

An old gentleman answered instantly, “Major, we can tell you without a doubt that plants are

sentient beings. This is observable from years of classic experiments. Just look at how plants can alter their liquid distribution to accommodate areas that are burnt. There is also evidence of animal-like homeostasis in many plants, and certain plants can also produce specific reactions if injected with specific types of chemicals...”

Yao Yuan quickly interjected, “What I mean is, is it possible for plant life to have a consciousness that is akin to ours? Like the predatory intention to set traps, or to prepare ambushes. Do plants

have the capability to plan stuff like that?”

The few biologists looked askance at one another, curious at where their major was going with this train of thought. One of them hesitantly answered, “I don’t think that’s possible. Even with Earth’s most ostentatiously predatory plant, the venus flytrap, its reaction is entirely chemical. The clasping of its mouth is a reaction to prey landing on its surface. The motor skill is made possible through the transference of water within its flexible stem. It is entirely reactionary; it is not

the flytrap itself going ‘food, me eat.’ Plants don’t have a nervous system like that of an animal to produce and act on concepts like these...”

Yao Yuan took some time to digest the information before finally adding, “Everyone, I’m just going through an imaginary scenario here, so just hear me out and tell me whether what I’m saying is possible. For survival, a species of plant undergoes evolution to gain the ability to connect with one another to form a hive mind. Individually, each of them works like a single synapse, but once

connected, they can maintain a semblance of consciousness.

“I know it’s a far-fetched concept, but this is the cosmos we’re dealing with, so we have to think outside the box. We can’t limit ourselves to Earth-bound knowledge. So I want everyone to approach this with a fresh perspective: is it possible for a plant species to achieve this level of evolution, to gain consciousness through a confluence of cells? To reach such a size and scale where it has the sophistication to control every other living organism of its planet and even attract prey

beyond the planet's confines? Earth's flowers could attract pollinators through use of colors and smell, so couldn't this evolved species do the same but with bigger prey and better manipulation techniques?"

The biologists were stunned by Yao Yuan's suggestion. It completely overturned everything they had learned. After a period of silent consideration, a biologist volunteered, "Alright, major, let's take your advice. We'll all start from a fresh perspective. If what you are saying is true, that a plant species was induced by

drastic evolution into achieving, or like what you said, merging into consciousness, then... there is still one loophole. Why wouldn't they strive for civilization? It has happened to every other sentient being, so why not them? A plant civilization might seem weird, but it's the next logical step, so why would they instead opt for the destruction of their home planet? It makes no sense."

Yao Yuan continued to struggle trying to get his point across. "No, I think you might have misunderstood what I've said. Yes, they have achieved

consciousness, but it is an awareness that is simplistic and primal... Like that of bees and ants, just advanced enough to systematically manage issues of reproduction, food, and survival, but not advanced enough to produce personas and psyches. Is that possible?”

The few biologists were still skeptical, but at that moment, the door flew open and a group of scientists rushed in. They announced excitedly, “Major, the autopsy has just finished. We’ve found an abundance of the green plants, or rather, the spores of these plants, within

the creature's body. When imbibed with water, they instantly germinate into the matured form that is now draining us of our energy. Also, we tried suppressing them with acid and it worked! All of their functions have been stunted, but they are still alive somehow. It's hard to believe, but with these results, we have to conclude that these plants are controlling this planet's creatures!"

There's no explicit mention of the unit being split in this chapter, but if I have to guess, the one group at the drill site is the group that went ahead to set

up camp (see chapter 34 for details), and the larger group would be the rest. Since there was no clear distinction between the two made by the author, I'm taking the authority to name the smaller group as Group A and larger group as Group B to avoid confusion.

Chapter 36:

Trademarked?!

"Based on the data we've compiled from our autopsy..." began the pathologist who stood beside Yao Yuan.

They were standing in front of the glass partition that separated them from the biology lab. Inside, a handful of scientists were still analyzing the alien body.

"The creature's carapace is

molded from different kinds of metallic substances. It's akin to a shell-like exoskeleton, but its tensile strength matches that of steel alloy with the hardest parts being even sturdier than that. Of course, that is not its most interesting feature..."

The pathologist continued excitedly, "We've stumbled across a new category of organism: an amalgamation of flora and fauna... Yes, major, you've not heard wrong. This creatures is a composite organism that is one part plant and one part animal. This is because our autopsy revealed

that latticed within the creature's animal physiology are plant spores. And these spores are the offspring of the plants that are currently draining us of our energy.

"This means that this creature does not need to consume food; it only needs water to survive, because water keeps the plant in its body alive. And through photosynthesis, or possibly some other digestive process, the plant can in turn provide the necessary nutrients for the creature to survive..."

Pointing beyond the glass panel towards a splice of green plant that sat inside a beaker, the pathologist explained, "When this plant is still young, it is unable to absorb energy and metals directly. Instead, it uses the airborne metallic particles that make up eleven percent of this planet's air in combination with water to create nutrients for survival. Also, we found out that this is a process that can be sped up in the presence of daylight. It's a chemical process that is completely unfamiliar to us."

The pathologist was practically

shaking with the excitement of this new discovery, but Yao Yuan, who was standing beside him, frowned. "If I remember correctly, these creatures have bodily fluids that are incredibly acidic. Why hasn't that prevented this parasitic relationship?"

Shaking his head, the pathologist clarified, "This is not really a parasitic relationship, it's more of a symbiotic one... Just imagine it as an evolved version of lichen. The spores are incredibly fragile, or rather, relatively fragile in comparison to everything else on this planet.

They would dry up instantly if exposed directly to the planet's sun, but since they need water to germinate and survive, they rely on these creatures for protection and mobility. In return, they produce nutrients as valuable sustenance for these animals. In this barren wasteland, they rely on each other to survive. However, this relationship lasts only as long as the plant's spore stage. When the plant is fully grown and thus gains the capability of directly digesting solid metal, it consumes its host from the inside out because ninety percent of these animals' bodies contain metallic elements...

"And so, perhaps as a method of adaptation to this necessary yet self-destructive relationship, these creatures learned to secrete acid into their bodily fluids as a way to slow the spores' growth. Our analysis shows that this is usable until the creature grows too old to maintain a high level of acidity in their blood. Then, nature takes its course..."

While the pathologist was going through his explanation, an experiment was taking place inside the lab, so the two men

turned to look. A biologist was pouring a cup of scalding water into the beaker with the plant splice. In just ten seconds, the less than five-centimeter-wide smudge grew to a moss-like bush the size of a grown man's palm. Glistening with an eerie greenish glow, it started to eat through the glass beaker.

The biologist quickly poured some acid onto it, lulling it into inactivity.

The pathologist turned back to Yao Yuan. "Anyway, we also

found out that the matured plant is equipped with some sort of sonar-like communication system. They can use it to issue prompts to the spores within their close proximity. It works by having the mother plant send out a kind of electrical or radio transmission to the spores. We aren't entirely sure how, but now we do know why this planet's fauna gives its flora a wide berth."

Still staring at the aftermath of the experiment, Yao Yuan asked, "What happens to the absorbed energy and metals then? Is it all used for growth?"

All of a sudden, the pathologist's expression darkened. After some obvious inner conflicts, he sighed. "No, it's not that... Major, please look at this enlarged image."

A monitor dropped down beside them and on it was an enlarged photo of a plant splice. The pathologist continued, "These plants seem to possess a degree of sentience in their actions. Instead of spreading out over the planet to increase their coverage, they congregate to form a colony. Of course,

depending on the period of formation, the colonies vary in size. But in all of them, a capsule-like entity forms in the center. This is an enlarged picture of such a center. As you can see, there are partitions to wall off specific areas for storing metals. In here, all the metals are in their basic forms and are cleanly organized. We believe that, for example, after they digest an alloy, it is deconstructed into steel, copper, and zinc and then separated into designated compartments. And at the center of this capsule is a small, clear crystal.

"With some calculations, we have confirmed that about ninety percent of the metals absorbed are stored and the remaining are either released back into the atmosphere or used by the plant itself. It's hard to tell which one it is. On the other hand, the energy that is absorbed is more complicated. It seems to vanish without a trace. The only thing that seems relevant is this crystal. Therefore, some scientists have come up with the speculation that... the plants have crystallized the energy."

"Crystallized energy?" repeated

Yao Yuan incredulously.

The incredulity was reflected on the pathologist's face. At that moment, a physicist beside them stepped forth. "Major, let me help explain that to you."

The pathologist nodded in courtesy and vacated his spot for the physicist, whom Yao Yuan could recognize as the German physicist, Silewei. The famed physicist moved before Yao Yuan, saying, "Crystallized energy, I agree, is the stuff of science fiction. An element of

pure energy sounds preposterous to any logical man... But theoretically speaking, it is not impossible. Take for an example, the common cellphone's power bank. Is that not an example of stored energy? The concept's the same. Technology is always improving, so this won't forever be the stuff of imagination. Nevertheless, the technology to crystallize energy is definitely not within human grasp. The force required to crystallize just one milligram of energy would be beyond human understanding."

Silewei stopped to point at the crystal on the monitor. "There are many mysteries in the cosmos, but for me, this isn't one of them. I'm certain that this crystal is not made of pure energy. It does contain energy in its composition, sure, but it is also constructed with other elements. Of course, even something like this is already beyond our comprehension... I would argue that we shouldn't even be analyzing these crystals, because we aren't certain of their potency and property. One wrong move and the Hope could be blasted into oblivion...

However..." Silewei added, "an intern of mine did have a curious hypothesis about these plants. Would Major be interested in hearing her out?"

Yao Yuan was still digesting all the information that was given to him. He was trying to formulate a plan that could take advantage of these plants' weaknesses or features to rescue geological unit A. Somewhat absent-mindedly, he nodded.

A few minutes later, an expressionless young woman

sauntered into the room. To his surprise, Yao Yuan recognized this lady as well. She was one of the three young ladies Zhang Heng had pledged his rank to rescue, and also one of the few civilians living on the fifth floor, Bo Li.

With just a simple nod at Yao Yuan, Bo Li went straight into business. "It's my opinion that these plants are man-made... I do not believe any plant life would naturally evolve to gain such industrialized properties."

A slack-jawed Yao Yuan asked in return, "Manmade? You mean through genetic engineering? But we don't have such advanced technology."

Bo Li looked askance at Yao Yuan, as if berating him for his idiocy. She later added, "In that case, let's call it alien-made."

Without missing a beat, Yao Yuan followed up. "But why? Why would an alien species engineer something that could contribute to the slow destruction of a whole planet?"

What good would that do? Then again, could it be that this biohazard is caused by an experiment gone awfully wrong?"

Bo Li turned to stare at the monitor. "You could be right... But don't you think that these plants are too purposeful in their actions? To collect metallic ores and energy crystals, these seem like specific purposes... I believe that these plants are some kind of harvester created by aliens. Just like how we created drills, an alien species engineered these plants to help harvest minerals. Unlike us,

who rely on manual labor, they would only need to pollinate a planet with these plants and after a certain period of time, perhaps a few decades or even centuries, they return to harvest these plants. They would have gathered the minerals and energy of a whole planet, and the process can be repeated as they traverse the galaxy.

"Don't you think that this kind of method is much more efficient and advanced than how we are currently gathering supplies?"

As Bo Li went through her elaboration, Yao Yuan could feel chills running down his spine...

If there was even a grain of truth behind what Bo Li was saying, then how advanced was this alien civilization? They have, after all, achieved such a godlike status that they can manufacture a new species! How disadvantaged mankind would be if pitted against such a civilization... the thought itself was spine-chilling!

At that moment, commotion

broke out within the lab. Not long after, the biologist's voice could be heard coming through the intercom. "Major, this plant's gene map has just been unveiled, but... Major, would you like to see it for yourself?"

"Of course!" replied Yao Yuan almost instantly. "We would all like to see it!"

Afterwards, on the monitor, the enlarged picture of the capsule was taken down and replaced by the plant's gene map...

It looked like a symbol overlaid with letters. Upon closer inspection, it looked more and more like...

"Trademark?" Guang Zhen asked curiously.

Yao Yuan nodded his head, repeating, "Yes, it does look like a trademark..."

"For what? To prevent counterfeiting...?"

Chapter 37: Operation Battery!

It was quite simply an unexpected shock!

An organism's genetic chain is supposed to be natural, formed through the hands of mother nature.

But the gene map before them was definitely not that. It was a recognizable business trademark! Upon closer inspection, one could even

discern the outline of the symbols. There was a globe that probably represented a planet, a sun image, and a triangular structure. The idea itself was out of this world, but it was obviously an alien business trademark. What was more incredible was that such an unnatural gene map could form a living organism, and one with good health and a specific function at that. It was a piece of alien technology beyond human comprehension!

The implications were endless. If there was a need for trademarking due to copyright

issues, one could only imagine how many competing alien companies were manufacturing such plants. And who knew what other unimaginable products would be on sale.

All of this produced an immense pressure on the people aboard the Hope!

Because in comparison, where would mankind stand in the grand scheme of things?

Probably even lower than a

space bug...

Everyone present was rendered speechless. They were all staring blankly at what everyone had to assume to be the peak of genetic engineering. It was an impressive technology that made everyone feel infinitely small. Even the usually stoic Bo Li was scrutinizing the gene map with a fervor shining in her eyes.

After he regained his senses, Yao Yuan hurriedly asked, "Are these plants near their

harvestable stage? No good will come out of us running into the alien civilization that will return to collect them!"

The biologist hesitantly replied, "The plants that are assaulting the Hope are already way over their harvestable period. In fact, I would guess that most of the plants on this planet are way over their maturity. After all, they should be harvested long before they drain their host planet completely dry..."

To everyone's surprise, Bo Li

suddenly added, "The alien civilization that manufactured these plants either have collapsed or have forgotten about this planet, so we don't need to worry about running into them."

That reminded Yao Yuan of something, but without taking any time to dwell on it, he asked Bo Li, "How can you be so sure of that? Where's your evidence?"

Pointing at the alien carcass inside the lab, Bo Li explained, "The composite organisms on

this planet have evolved way beyond their initial symbiotic relationship. Following the drastic changes that have occurred to this planet, their relationship has transformed into a parasitic one. That process of evolution must have taken at least millions of years. No matter the civilization, if they abandoned their harvester for even 10000 years, one could safely assume that something horrendous has happened to said civilization."

Yao Yuan chewed over the facts before finally concurring, "Indeed, you're right. Also, not

only has the relationship changed, but these plants have even grown to cultivate a hive mind... Alright, everyone, a lot of the mysteries surrounding this planet have been made clear. Now I need to know if there are any ways to save the stranded Unit A and get rid of the plants draining our energy!"

That stumped everyone into silence. After seeing the plant's impossible gene map, a pall of despair had settled over the room and it had not dissipated since. With their limited technology, how could man face something so much more

advanced?

Was there still hope for the Hope?

Yao Yuan sighed. "Please discuss this further to come up with a solution to destroy the plants. You have one hour. It sounds cruel, but we don't have time to waste. If there is still no result after the one hour is up, open the discussion to the public. Perhaps they will come up with some interesting proposals..."

With that, Yao Yuan turned and left.

Guang Zhen immediately made to follow. As he reached Yao Yuan, he asked, "Why are we leaving? Aren't we going to stay to discuss the solution with everyone?"

Yao Yuan shook his head. "We have another problem to worry about. Dealing with the plants requires the intellect and expertise of the scientists, but rescuing the trapped geological unit is our responsibility...

There are about three thousand people combined in those units; we can't just abandon them!"

Guang Zhen saw a serious look return to Yao Yuan's face. He was very familiar with that look. Every time they found themselves in the brink of disaster, Yao Yuan would put on that serious façade and eventually the problem would be solved. Hence, he knowingly asked,

"You have thought of a way to handle those alien creatures,

haven't you, Ol' Cap'n? But how? There are so many of them."

Yao Yuan nodded affirmatively. "Indeed, there are many of them. Not only that, they are also hidden underground, big in size, relentless in their attacks, and almost invincible. However, there is a rock to every scissor, a scissor to every paper, and a paper to every rock. That's why I decided to pay a visit to the lab, to learn of these creatures' weakness. Now I've found it, it's time for action. It's time for Operation Battery!"

A few minutes later, in the fifth floor war room, every squad leader and lieutenant except Ebon had gathered to listen to Yao Yuan's plan for rescue.

"...those are all the key details regarding the rescue operation. The most crucial part is the batteries' deposit location."

Yao Yuan looked at the soldiers before him and saw that some were jotting down notes. He continued, in a severe tone, "Currently, there are two groups that need rescuing. One is at a

mining encampment twenty kilometers away from here. There are about two hundred soldiers, three hundred plus scientists, and engineers that remain there. They are also accompanied by a fleet of hovercrafts, whose actual number I'm not entirely sure because we have to take into account a few of them being damaged in the alien assault.

"The other team is only three or four kilometers away. This group has about two thousand and four hundred people. Among them are about two hundred soldiers with the rest

being unarmed civilians. They don't have access to any hovercrafts, so they are travelling by foot. Because they have to rush back to the Hope, they can't stop to garrison themselves. There are only reports of small skirmishes so far, but if they are attacked by a big group, their fate will be worse than that of the group stranded at the mining site!

"To ensure everyone's safety, every single hovercraft on the Hope will be at your disposal. This is to make sure there is enough space to accommodate everyone.

"First, all of the hovercrafts will move to save the larger group. Then two will stay to escort the survivors back to the Hope. What you will have to do is drop a battery every ten meters. Essentially, there will be two hovercrafts bookending the return trip that will be dropping batteries along the way. For a three kilometer journey, you'll need about six hundred batteries, but to be sure, the two hovercrafts will be carrying a total of one thousand batteries. If monsters appear, drop more batteries to lead them away from the main team.

"All of the other hovercrafts will move on towards the encampment. Also, I want to remind everyone to not open your space suits' helmets, because that will attract the attention of the monsters. When you're at the camp, this is the plan: deposit batteries at its outer perimeter to lure the creatures away from the inner camp. When the opportunity presents itself, swoop in to complete the rescue.

"This operation as a whole is not complicated but incredibly

dangerous. This is because you are not facing human beings, and it is on unfamiliar grounds as well, so do not let your preconceived notions get in the way. If there are emergencies and you can't contact the Hope, look for your own way out! If it helps the goal of saving the people, you are allowed to make use of any machinery and even the hovercrafts in any way you see fit. I will not hold you men responsible for any damage.

"Just keep this in mind: there are only 120000 of us left. We can't afford to lose anymore. Any single one of these fellow

men could be the light that keeps the future of mankind shining!

"And dismissed! Be prepared to move out in ten minutes!"

Everyone in the room stood up to salute Yao Yuan. Then, in a chorus of multiple languages, a reply could be heard,

"Sir, yes, sir!"

Chapter 38: Smoke and Mirrors

Jay was bummed out of his mind. Although, to be fair, the feeling was much more of a despairing variant than an annoying one.

When will his streak of bad luck end?!

At the moment, his group was caught in a stalemate in the middle of nowhere. All he could see around him was sand, so he

had no way of telling how close they were to the Hope. What he could be certain of though was that the desert creatures were definitely closing in on them. He could even feel the occasional shifting of the ground below his feet, signifying their presence.

It was, to say the least, horrifying. These monsters looked like they had come out of his worst nightmares. They all had shell-like exoskeletons presumably to prevent the loss of bodily fluids through perspiration. They were also gigantic in size, looking very much unlike earth's fauna.

Therefore, the unlikely fact that they were a reality before them probably posed the biggest threat of all.

Comparatively, the two hundred soldiers that accompanied them were rather useless. Their weapons did no visible damage to the creatures[1], and that's against creatures that had the audacity to emerge from the ground; they had no way of dealing with those that hid beneath the sand.

Of course, if they were

accompanied by the Hope's two thousand four hundred soldiers, things could have gone very differently. They probably wouldn't be out here risking their lives but hidden inside the safety of the Hope while jet planes annihilated these creatures with airstrikes. They could even drop an atomic bomb and be done with this damnable planet.

In other words, this group of two hundred common soldiers and two thousand two hundred plus unarmed citizens was nothing but a feast waiting to be had.

When they saw the creatures closing in, the feeling of dread surrounding the group gradually grew.

Submerged in this shroud of gloom, Jay felt increasingly helpless. He expected a simple gathering mission, not a death trap! He stole a glance at Xiao Chen, who was tightly holding on to his hand, and despite his best intentions, he couldn't help but wonder whether it was her who caused him all these troubles. After all, his tumble with misfortunes did start with

his introduction to her...

Carefully and quietly, Jay pulled Xiao Chen from their original position to a place between the group's center and outer perimeter. He knew that for a group of their size, in the event of an attack, the most vulnerable spots were the center and the outer perimeter. Naturally, the people on the outside were the ones most exposed to attacks, but most people forget that the people in the center usually get trampled to death because they are literally standing in the middle of everyone else.

Suddenly, a few soldiers cut through the crowd, and weirdly enough they were engaging people in conversation. When one walked before Jay, he stopped and asked, in a robotic tone that was honed from having to repeat the same question all too many times, “Do you have anything charged on you? Something like a walkman or battery?”

Both Jay and Xiao Chen shook their heads. Before the soldier could take his leave though, Xiao Chen grabbed hold of him and

asked, “All of those paraphernalia were confiscated when we first boarded the Hope. We weren’t allowed to keep any of our stuff other than our tents... So could you tell us why we need these things now?”

The anxious soldier wanted to shrug Xiao Chen off, but perhaps due her young age, he replied somewhat cryptically as he retreated back into the crowd, “I too have no clue; it was an order from the Hope. They said that reinforcements are coming our way and that these alien creatures are afraid of batteries or something.

Anyway, our safety can be guaranteed if we have enough batteries!”

When the soldier had retreated out of earshot, Xiao Chen groused, “What more do they still need? They have already taken my laptop, my MP4, my iPad, and my...”

Jay interrupted, “That’s your fault for bringing so many things in the first place. They stated before boarding that we are only allowed less than twenty kilograms worth of

luggage. You should know this.”

Xiao Chen glared crossly at Jay and said pointedly, “What are you on about this time? I’m talking about the additional clause that was written specifically on electronic gadgets. Oops, I forgot, unlike myself, you can’t read chinese. Sucks to be you then...”

She does know how to push my buttons, thought a simmering Jay. Then again, ignoring her boastful nature, Xiao Chen was a good person, and she wasn’t

issuing empty boasts. What Jay was most worried about then was his cover being blown, so sticking with Xiao Chen, who could be of help to him in the future, might not be a bad idea. Who knew what they would do if they found out he was a liar? He might even be thrown out of the Hope, and with these creatures around, that was a prospect he wouldn't enjoy. And so, in spite of him already having gone through all sorts of expletives in his mind, he merely laughed.

Then, sounds of gunfire came from the outer perimeter.

Amidst the cacophony, Jay could even discern the unmistakable sound of people groaning. Stuck in the middle of the crowd, neither Jay nor Xiao Chen could tell what was happening.

As the sound of gunfire and screaming became more frequent, the crowd started to get increasingly hysterical. That combined with the continuous gliding of the sand beneath their feet had prompted a stampede. People jostled into one another and knocked each other down as they went about like heedless animals. Many were injured in the process.

In the meantime, the soldiers within the group tried to maintain order, but it was to no avail. Before long, even they were lost in the chaotic wave of human bodies.

Most of the other soldiers stationed themselves on the outer perimeter to battle the alien creatures. The incident that started this conflict was the appearance of a giant sea-urchin-like creature that ambushed and killed two soldiers. Luckily, it was shot down instantly by an electro

magnetized bullet. The soldiers were already briefed about the explosion of acid after the creature's death and thus, they evaded tactfully.

However, this didn't mean that they were holding their ground. With the creature's death, its acidic bodily fluids inadvertently set the other creatures on a frenzy!

About ten more monsters surfaced above ground. Among them were a few creatures that could only be described as bone

dragons. Their size was so big that only the upper parts of their heads could be seen above ground. But what could be seen was terrifying enough. Their heads were made up entirely of bones and the place where there were supposed to be eyes had hollow holes instead. With a chomp, a great area of sand was engulfed and along with it went the people who were unfortunate enough to be standing in it.

After the initial encounter, the two hundred soldiers were almost wiped out within minutes. Of course, the civilians

faced an even higher number of casualties. When people started getting picked off, all hell broke loose. More and more people broke off from the group, hoping to escape from the carnage, but that only made them easier targets. Within just a few steps, needles appeared from underneath the ground and they were shrunk into mummies in almost an instant. That deterred the rest from straying from the group, but that hardly helped the situation. People were continuously being trampled and the alien monsters even started appearing among them. It was a literal bloodbath!

“...energy, energy, energy...”

Jay was in absolute terror. His hand that was holding Xiao Chen was shaking uncontrollably.

“Right, how could I forget that I have energy on myself?!”

Jay immediately removed his helmet and shoved his hand into his space suit. After a few seconds of searching, he removed his hand and a pen appeared within his grasp. It

was a gaudy pen with a small light bulb attached to its end. When a small button on its side was pressed, it gave off a weak glow.

His action gave Xiao Chen quite a shock. She immediately moved to close his helmet, then she yelled, "Have you lost your mind? These creatures are attracted to the water vapor in our breath!"

Suddenly, a violent tremor erupted underneath their feet. Before them, like a nightmarish

freak show, a cavern of darkness slowly surfaced. It was the mouth of one of the bone dragons. It was so big that a few people had fallen to their deaths after being lifted up by it. Attracted by Jay's breath, it was ready to chomp down on them.

“This is a source of energy! Aren't you supposed to be afraid of this? There is a ton of energy in this!”

The roof of the creature's mouth was ready to fall, and the anxiety of death had stunned

everyone into a quiet submission. Jay, however, felt strangely at peace. Suddenly, the din around him melted away and only the echo of his last sentence could be heard reverberating all over the area... 'There is a ton of energy in this!'

As if locked in time, the head suddenly stopped moving. Then, small, green buds started blooming in its bone crevices. In response, the creature started gyrating as if in extreme pain before retreating underground. At the same time, a tremor started emanating from underneath Jay.

All of the creatures in their vicinity were visibly affected by this as well. Abandoning their prey, they disappeared in the blink of an eye, leaving behind only a series of sand trails...

Then, all around Jay, a cluster of dense vegetation grew. Their finger-like tendrils circled the air, as if searching for a target...

Sometime later, the soldiers became useful again when they thought of using the electro-magnetized bullets they had

bought.

Chapter 39: The rescue and the plan (top)

When the rescue team reached Jay's group, a bloody yet eerily surreal scene unfolded before them.

The original two thousand four hundred plus people had dwindled down to about one thousand and eight hundred while waiting for help to arrive. Around six hundred lives were lost and almost a quarter of those were trampled to death amidst the chaotic commotion.

The surrealism though came from an unexpected development. In the middle of the carnage stood a young couple. They were shaking so hard that they could barely hold themselves up. They didn't dare fall though because beneath their feet was a floor of green plants that was slowly retreating. Afraid of complications, the rest of their group had given them a wide berth.

The rescue team was understandably shocked when

they arrived, but they had no time to stop and investigate. All they had time to do was to take a few quick snaps of the situation and beam them back to the Hope. After that, other than the two hovercrafts that were ordered to stay and tend to the survivors, the rest of the fleet went off to rescue Unit A.

Jay saw the arrival of the hovercraft fleet out of the corner of his eye, but frankly, he didn't have the luxury to pay them much attention beyond that. He was trying immensely hard to not move a muscle for fear that sudden movement would cause

the plant tendrils that were still circling around him to lash out against him. Getting mummified was definitely not on his to-do list!

Xiao Chen, who was still holding Jay's hand, was similarly scared, but not as much as Jay. She too wouldn't dare to move, but her eyes continued to scan the plants underneath them. She noticed that there were a lot of creeping movements, as if they were searching for something.

The soldiers on rescue detail decided to not approach the couple because the situation was too much of an anomaly to act rashly. Back in the Hope's labs, these plants had shown a capability to eat through all sorts of materials, including the space suits. However, they did find out that the plants wouldn't directly digest human flesh; they had the animals under their control to do that. That was why the scene before them was so confusing. The couple was knee-deep in these plants, yet they appeared unharmed and their space suits were wholly intact. However, they knew for certain that they had no time to waste. The plot of vegetation was

already slowly decreasing in size, and the moment they were completely gone, the creatures would return and that could only spell doom.

Of the people who stayed, there were two Black Stars. One went by the name of Lin Fei Biao and the other was Yang Wa Luo. Fei Biao was of average height, build, and looks; there was nothing of note in his appearance other than a gleam of viciousness that occasionally flashed within his eyes. Wa Luo, on the other hand, was a fragile-looking, soft-spoken individual. If not told of his position,

nobody would have guessed he was a soldier.

Each of the men had a hovercraft under their command. Following their orders, they started depositing batteries along the designated trail.

When the first battery landed on the sand, it was as if the plants were affected. Almost instantly, they disappeared from underneath Jay and Xiao Chen.

The couple breathed a collective sigh of relief and then slowly slid to the floor. Immediately after, a troop of soldiers joined them, lifted them up, and started to escort them back towards the Hope.

Both Jay and Xiao Chen were still too stunned to realize that they had been given special treatment. Instead of leading them back to the civilian survivors, they were marched alongside the soldiers. As they gradually walked off their dazed state, they started to pay notice to their surroundings.

One of the things they noticed was that at the very front of the troop, a hovercraft had been dropping square-looking objects at regular intervals. And as the mysterious objects hit the soft sand, bursts of green would appear. Later they noticed that this strange phenomenon was happening at the rear end of the party as well.

Probably still reeling from residual shock, Jay was reservedly pensive. Xiao Chen though had slowly reverted back to her dauntless self. She

grabbed one of the soldiers beside her and asked, "What are they tossing? And why does it attract the plants? And why do we need to attract these plants?"

The soldier was African American and he was visibly annoyed by the interruption and bombardment of questions. Nevertheless, he had the grace to patiently answer, "According to scientific study, these plants are heavy deterrents against this planet's fauna. As long as they are around, the creatures won't come near us. For some reason, these plants are heavily attracted to energy and

metals. Okay, miss, I've answered your questions, can you please let me go now?"

Xiao Chen harrumphed and let the soldier go. Jay, who was standing beside her and overheard the conversation, started to have a ridiculous thought fermenting in his head.

Is it possible that... the plants appeared before because they understood what he said? He said that there was a ton of energy with him and thus they

appeared in search of it?

But could that really be the truth? Now even alien plants could understand English....? That's preposterous!

While Jay was busy wracking his head over the impossible idea, the party had made it safely back to the Hope against all odds. There was instant celebration when they went through the cabin door. Some even fainted from the combination of prolonged exertion and sudden burst of joy.

The medical team who stood ready at the entrance quickly rushed forward to issue help. People with serious injuries were carried off to immediate treatment and those with minor injuries were given balms and bandages.

The setting was a mix of confusion and order. The one thousand plus survivors felt like they were literally given a second lease at life.

Despite having no visible wounds, Jay and Xiao Chen were

also approached by a doctor. When the doctor was trying to assess their situation, a group of black star close-guards sidled up to the trio. The leader said, "Mister Jay Wales and Miss Feng Xiao Chen, am I right? Would you two please follow me?" After that, the group stood to the side, waiting for the pair to move.

Both Jay and Xiao Chen were slack-jawed at the sudden request. But before long, that shock turned into fear for Jay. He felt like his heart had gone up to his throat, because he knew that he was found out, and his head slowly went through all

the possible methods of torture that he would be subjected to...

Will I be thrown into jail? He believed the possibility of that was low, because that still required resources to keep him alive. Plus, weren't they already in a giant jail cell surrounded by space...?

Then he went to the possibility of being exiled out of the Hope! That would be a fate worse than death. He had seen with his own eyes what those monsters could do. He would rather die than

suffer more encounters with them!

Or could he still lie his way through... It did do wonders for him thus far, but what if they put him to the test, or question him on geology? What would he do then?!

Going through all the possible scenarios, none of them positive, Jay considerably paled. Spotting this, the attending doctor injected, "Sir, it's my professional opinion that they stay to be given proper

treatment and examination. They have gone through an ordeal, so unless you can confirm that they won't be maltreated, I won't allow my patients to be so barbarically dragged away!"

Unfazed, the leader replied, "I'm sorry, doctor, but I can't let that happen. What I can tell you is that this is a direct order from the Major, and it's related to the survival of the Hope." He turned to look at Jay and Xiao Chen. "The most I can give you is another thirty seconds. After that, whether you like it or not, you two will be coming with us."

At the same time, Yao Yuan was being briefed by a few scientists of their latest findings in the conference room.

"Major, we have conducted more experiments on this planet's species of plant. They are not directly harmful to man, but they are highly resistant to heat, acidic solutions, and alkaline solutions. Also, they are so durable that normal weapons can do them no harm. So to dispose of them, we could either try to cut through them with high-powered lasers, or suppress

their movements with a large acid bath..."

While listening to the leading scientist's explanation, Yao Yuan had his eyes trained on the monitor before him. His frown deepened as the Hope's energy level that was projected on the screen dropped. His hands were tied because he couldn't order the engine room to stop the nuclear energy generators. If he did so, the plants would start eating the Hope instead and that would be even worse!

"Are there any other ways? There isn't a great store of acid sitting around the Hope; plus, we can't just create some high-powered lasers. There must be some other more realistic ways. Has the Academy learned how the alien civilization controlled these plants? Don't tell me that they came prepared with a spaceship full of acid every time they harvested them," asked Yao Yuan anxiously.

The scientists in the room stole glances at one another. They were equally frustrated, perhaps even more so than Yao Yuan, because they were stumped at

the thing that they were supposed to contribute to the Hope: scientific knowledge. However, the difference in levels of technology was simply too great between the two civilizations. Plus, they were on a time crunch, so they couldn't just pull out and answer in such a short period.

Suddenly, Yao Yuan called them over. "Come and look at this." Then he pushed a button on the screen and a video popped up. It showed Jay and Xiao Chen standing amidst the bush of vegetation.

"So the story was that the group was going to be wiped out by an alien assault. This pair here was almost killed by one of the aliens, but suddenly, the man whipped out a pen and yelled, 'There is a ton of energy in here.' Following that, a pool of plants appeared..."

After a series of explanations, Yao Yuan turned to address the scientists. "I want to know how this man summoned these plants and why they appeared even when there was no actual source of energy near him. Also,

we've entertained the possibility of these plants having a hive mind; I want a confirmation on that. And most crucially... these plants eat these alien creatures because they have metallic elements in their bodies, but don't we have those elements in our body composition as well? Why don't they do that to us? Has it got something to do with these animals being controlled?"

Pointing at the screen to stress his point, Yao Yuan added, "We don't have much time to figure all these things out. They have drained enough energy to deplete us of 1 space warp. The

ship could only make four jumps; we've used one, and they've drained another, so now we're down to two... So be quick! We have to find ways to escape this planet soon, or only death and destruction will be waiting for us!"

Chapter 40: The rescue and the plan (bottom)

The scientists were asked to leave the room. In the company of their own colleagues, criticisms about how Yao Yuan handled the situation started to fly.

The fact was that Yao Yuan had no clue how to manage the 120000 community on the Hope.

One of the reasons was because their escape from Earth was too

sudden, so he didn't have time to secure more people that were good at human resource management. Furthermore, he was a man of action and thus wasn't familiar with the nuances of social administration.

Organization within the Academy was also much more complicated than Yao Yuan had expected. He wanted the scientific community to be divided into major committees according to their subjects and each would be led by a committee leader. However, depending on their size and functionality, many of these

major committees birthed smaller subgroups, so issues of leadership became increasingly convoluted. For example, Yao Yuan had initially handpicked Alan as the committee leader of the astrophysics committee, but later the committee itself had fractured into smaller subgroups, and most of them wanted Alan as their leader. The conflicting loyalties led to many inter and intra committee rivalries.

At the moment though, scientists from differing disciplines had put down their differences to gather at the

conference room. They were waiting for their leaders to return from their meeting with Yao Yuan.

When they were told of the current situation, the faces of everyone present darkened. They now knew how serious the situation was. If they lost the Hope, the consequences would be unimaginable...

Suddenly, one female scientist broke the silence by offering, "Everyone, there's no use sulking. Why don't we try to

drop our preconceived scientific notions and think outside of the box for once? Maybe it'll lead somewhere."

With a deep Italian accent, she added, "I'll be the one to start then... In my opinion, there are too many details that are unknown about these plants. So instead of analyzing them one by one, why don't we look at them as a whole? For example, the Major mentioned the possibility of them having a hive mind. And it is because of subconscious suggestions from this hive mind that we were lulled into ordering an immediate mining unit

without waiting for, now looking back, much needed preparation and analysis.

"However, this might not be the whole truth. Is it not possible that they weren't intending to lure us into a trap but instead were reminding us that the collection of energy and minerals had been completed and that it is time for harvest?"

The female scientist's supposition sent many of her colleagues into deep contemplation. Among them

was a twenty-plus intern. After the female scientist finished speaking, his mind went into a dreamlike place where it was quiet, safe, and peaceful. Caught within this state, he could make out someone whispering into his ears, and almost against his will, he repeated out loud, "Yes, that is entirely true. That would explain why they didn't directly consume us when we humans also have metallic substances in our bodies... Somehow, these plants could tell that we are sentient beings.

"That is the biggest difference between us and the creatures on

this planet. The animals here are vicious but simplistic; we on the other hand, are complex. We have the ability to think and to have a civilization..."

Suddenly, the intern screamed. The room stared at him as he continued with a dumbstruck look in his eyes, "They're the product of civilization! When the alien civilization created these plants, they must have infused them with some kind of limitation, just like how we have three laws of robotics! Because they are too powerful in nature, their creators must have added restrictions to prevent them

from harming beings with sentience and civility. They are able to detect these qualities by attuning to other organisms' brainwave frequencies. If the frequency reaches a certain level, they would be able to tell that said creatures are civilized... That's why they won't harm us directly! They assume we are their creators!"

This hypothesis introduced a sliver of hope to the people within the conference room. The more they thought about it, the more they felt like it could very much be true.

A heavily bearded scientist suddenly asked, "Is it possible that these plants themselves are controlled through the power of the mind? To put it in another way, could we use some sort of machine to control these plants by amplifying the brain power of its wearer?"

That possibility had the scientists talking. Speculations and hypotheses were thrown all over the room. In some cases, the discussion was so intense that it led to serious arguments. After ten minutes of such

controlled chaos, the female scientist clapped her hands a few times to reign in everyone's attention, then she said, "Folks, let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let us first review what we have hypothesized so far.

"First, this plant species does have a hive mind, a feature that was probably put in place when it was created. It is used to control the functionality of this plant in case it grows out of control. Also, it acts as a system for easier reporting and surveillance...

"When The Hope space-warped within the vicinity of this planet, the plant's hive mind detected our presence. Using some mysterious method, probably through the attunement of brainwave frequency as the young fellow has said, it could tell that we are a sentient civilization. Then they probably sent out some kind of brain signal to alert us that they are way over their harvestable period.

"Perhaps because our brains weren't wired in such a way to be receptive of these signals, we were hypnotized by them

instead. That led to an expedient landing. Now, since we don't have the technology to mind control these plants, they are siphoning the energy from the Hope because that is what they were engineered to do. Here, I have to disagree with the statement that it is because we are mentally dull that we are unable to control these plants. It is my opinion that it is rather because we haven't been able to tap into their frequency that we fail to do so. Like a radio, we have to tap into their frequency to gain a channel for communication and perhaps mind control."

The scientist took a pause before adding, "That is what we have figured out so far. It could have connected to the young couple because the man somehow tuned into this frequency. Humans have been shown to be able to do almost miraculous activities in extreme situations, so it is not without precedent."

"Then is it possible to get the man to tell the plants below the Hope to leave?" asked a man standing beside the female scientist. Without waiting for an answer though, he shook his head defeatedly.

Another scientist butted in. "That is absolutely impossible. As it has been said, the man probably entered this state unconsciously, so what are the chances that he could manually do it again? Even if he could replicate the experience, as you've seen on the video, the area of plants he could control was only one hundred meters wide; that is very small when compared the actual size of the Hope. Unless we can get a few ten thousands people to be able to do what he did, the plants that he evacuated will just return after he moves away from the spot."

This time, even the female scientist was greeted with a dead-end. There appeared to be no way out anymore.

To everyone's surprise, the young intern who had previously spoken started talking again.

He felt himself acting as the vessel of the voice whispering in his ears, because the words were not his but the voice's.

"Dear professors and instructors, it is my belief that the word 'absolute' shouldn't exist in science..."

He had the attention of the room now, but instead of wilting under it, he seemed to be gaining traction as he continued,

"It is our common belief that every single planet has its own unique ecosystem and interspecies relationships. It is wrong to use one framework to understand them all. For example, a deadly virus on

Planet A could be a source of vitamin for organisms on Planet B...

"We talked about lasers and acid baths because we were too trapped in our own tunnel vision. Who could affirmatively say that things that are typically harmless to Earth's plants will be harmless to these alien plants as well? Think about it; we have not come across this creator civilization before and they have not gained contact with us humans either. So when they created this species of plant, how could they have immunized it against Earth's common plant

viruses without knowing what Earth is?

"We have planted all sorts of plants in the sixth floor biomes, so doesn't this mean that we have access to many different types of Earth's plant viruses as well? We should extract them to conduct more experiments, because who knows, without us realizing it, we might have had the trump card in our hands all this time!"

At the same time, Yao Yuan was going through the video again as

he questioned Jay and Xiao Chen.

When he found out that the purpose of his summon was for some simple questioning, Jay had sighed in relief. Nevertheless, he wasn't of much help regarding the questions that he was posed. He himself was quite out of it during the whole process, so he could only provide vague answers. Similarly, Xiao Chen, who just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time, also couldn't contribute much to the conversation. And so, after some further questioning, she was led

out of the room while only Jay, the main person of interest, remained.

Contrary to what Yao Yuan had hoped, things hadn't gotten clearer. While he was frowning over the lack of development, Yao Yuan had a fit of inspiration and asked, "Jay, are you one of the 102 people who survived Virus X?"

Jay nodded cautiously, adding, "That's true. I have been known to have a healthy disposition, so that's probably how I survived

the ordeal."

Jay started to sweat because Yao Yuan used an inordinate amount of time to process his answer. Adding to Jay's consternation, Yao Yuan then lifted Jay's data file off the table and proceeded to flip through it slowly. Finally, he asked a question that made Jay feel like the floor underneath his feet was falling away.

"Mister Jay Wales, this whole file of yours is a lie. You are a liar. For example, you lied about

your level of education, am I right?"

Jay knew that he was found out and thus immediately launched into his explanation. "Major, please let me explain. This is all a simple misunderstanding..."

With a flick of his wrist, Yao Yuan closed the file and shut down Jay's weak defense. "Okay, I'm willing to call it a misunderstanding, but first, you have to tell me, in specific details, what happened in this video! Why did those plants

appear?"

On the verge of tears, Jay replied, "Major, I already told you, I really don't know what was happening then..."

"Guards! Toss this man out of the Hope this instant!" ordered Yao Yuan as he made to leave.

When a soldier came into the room, words came tumbling out of Jay's mouth in quick succession. "At that moment, I just felt everything go silent!

Then, call it old habits die hard, but right then, I felt a lie forming at the tip of my tongue. Without giving it much thought, I yelled that lie and those plants appeared. That's all, Major, I promise!"

"I'm not sure how much a liar's promise would be worth, but..." Yao Yuan sat back down and waved the soldier away.

Then he started thinking.

(Could that be this man's

superhuman power? The ability to lie... to trick even this plant species' hive mind?)

Then the monitor in the room lit up. On it appeared the excited faces of a few scientists.

The leading scientist said, "Major! Good news and bad news! The good news is that we found a way to kill these plants. Using a plant virus that is common to Earth's vegetation, it could kill these plants in an instant. Ironically, because these plants have an increased

absorption rate, they are very susceptible to viruses that targets a plant's xylem and phloem. While it would take months for this virus to take its toll on Earth's plants, it can wilt this alien plant in a matter of seconds!

"However, Major, because development is so fast, the effect of the virus is very much localized. It wasn't even given time to spread before the affected plants wilted and died."

The conflicted expressions of

the scientists on the screen expressed perfectly the ludicrousness of the situation. Previously, their problem was that the plants were too indestructible, but now that they had found its weakness, the problem became that they were too fragile...

The leading scientist continued, "And so, one of our interns suggested such an idea...

"To inject the virus right into the heart of these plants, the central storage area so to speak,

the spot where all the collected materials congregate and where the largest energy crystal would be. With that, perhaps the Hope could escape from the clutches of these plants and lift off into space!

"However, the key problem is that we are unable to locate this so called heart. There was a proposal to initiate all three nuclear generators as bait to lure it out, but these plants are already so well-fed that even that might not be enticing enough for its heart to appear. Major, that's our latest update. We've tried the best we can."

Yao Yuan thanked the scientists for their effort and turned to stare conspiratorially at Jay.

"Mister Wales, I believe everything is indeed a huge misunderstanding.... In fact, if you could help the Hope with this one simple favor, I'll personally make sure that it remains a misunderstanding," said Yao Yuan with an overtly kind smile.

"Huh?"

Chapter 41: A Hail Mary Bet!

At around 4:45 PM, the rescue mission was completed. The operation tallied a loss of three hovercrafts, a total of two hundred soldiers, as well as one hundred plus scientists, technicians, and engineers. These were valuable human assets. Therefore, it was without a doubt a big loss for the Hope.

At the same time, finishing touches were being done on the Hope's last functioning shuttle. It was being prepared to fly.

However, that was not all that was behind the hustle and bustle on the Hope. The spaceship's three nuclear energy generators had also kicked into high gear.

At this point, the Hope only had enough energy to initiate two more space warps. In other words, around one third of its energy had already been drained.

Three space-suit-wearing men stood in the alcove of the hangar that housed this last shuttle. They were Yao Yuan, Zhang

Heng, and Jay. The weak flames of the cigars dangling from each of their hands illuminated the bare faces of these harried men. Their appearance would not have been noticed if not for Zhang Heng's constant coughing from trying to keep the cigar smoke down.

Frowning, Yao Yuan advised, "Just give it a break, Zhang Heng. If you can't get used to smoking cigars, stick to cigarettes. This is, after all, Jay's request. You don't have to go along with it if you don't want to."

With a trembling hand that could barely hold on to the cigar, Zhang Heng surly replied, “I knew that. In fact, what I wouldn’t give for a bag of powder[1] right now. However, I have never tried a cigar before in my life, so I thought I’d give it a go because, god knows, this opportunity might not come again.”

With a sigh that reflected their shared frustration and desperation, Yao Yuan went over to give him a brotherly hug, and that communicated all that

needed to be communicated.

Beside them, Jay said, with a hint of acid in his voice, “Yup, that’s sad. Unlike me, you are a lieutenant after all; why they would order you to accompany a criminal such as myself on this one-way journey is beyond me. And to think I have avoided judgment by escaping into space, how naïve I was... But how about you, Major, sir? You are the owner of this ship, its dictator so to speak, so why have you deigned to join us on this fruitless journey?”

“I just want to complete the mission I’ve given myself.” Without looking at either Zhang Heng or Jay, Yao Yuan glanced at the floor and said rather monotonously, “Everyone has to bear way too many burden in life, but only cowards and weaklings run away from them. Because these burdens are also one’s responsibilities and sometimes even duties, they are not things that one can simply discard...”

Jay retorted sardonically, “That is indeed so noble of you, our mighty savior... It makes criminals like me so shame-

faced that I am so inclined to commit suicide to redeem myself.”

“How is keeping a promise one made a long time ago noble..?” asked Yao Yuan with a rare kindness in his eyes. Then he took a long drag of the cigar but ended up choking himself and hacking up a storm.

After his coughs petered out, Yao Yuan turned to look at Jay and Zhang Heng. With a sincere tone, he said, “Don’t think so highly of me. The amount of

blood I've had on my hands will easily detach me from the concept of the word 'noble.' Everything I do is merely to fulfill a promise because that is a responsibility that I have made...

“So, don't see this as being forced upon you... Jay, is it not the great American cinema that says 'with great power comes great responsibility?' Because let's be honest, we have all been gifted with great powers following a recent event. An old friend of mine called this new generation of human beings the homo evolutis. Of course, that

having any scientific validity is another issue completely, but it is undeniable that Zhang Heng, you have been granted the gift of divination. You can foretell the arrival of danger. And Jay, your gift of psychological manipulation has been enhanced, because let's honest, that is how you have managed to go undiscovered for so long. I myself have the ability to see the projection of malice and I have heightened reflexes. Also, I realized I have also been given the power of impeccable navigation, so that is why I will be the pilot for this last shuttle...

“Zhang Heng, you will be our alarm, so I want you to inform me whenever you sense danger approaching. Jay, on the other hand... I’ll be frank: you will be the bait. You need to convince the heart of these plants to approach us. Those are essentially the only details of this mission. If we survive, then Jay, not only will your previous criminal record be completely wiped, you will be welcomed back into the Hope as its hero. I’ll award you the rank of unit captain and you’ll be given a residence at the Barracks.

“Zhang Heng, as a member of

the Black Star Unit, it is your duty to complete the mission that is given to you. But if we succeed, no one will look down on you anymore, and I promise you that incidents like your little run-in with Ying will never be repeated again.”

It was hard to tell whether it was Jay that was the sweet-talker or was it Yao Yuan, because Jay had to admit that he was very much swayed...

Suddenly, from the depths of his childhood memories, a

sentence rang out as clear as day.
“Mom and dad, I’ll grow up to
be a hero! You’ll see!”

Jay took some time to recover from the unexpected trip down memory lane and then he somewhat nonchalantly said, “Either way, I have no way out, so I’ll do as you say. I’m just afraid that if this thing you called gift of psychological manipulation is a dud, we would truly have a hot mess on our hands.”

That surprisingly caused Yao

Yuan to laugh. “If that’s the case, at least we could die happy knowing we have tried our best... We would have the courage to face our families and loved-ones that are waiting down there...”

“Down there? I’m not going down there, I’d rather go up there,” replied Jay, who obviously didn’t subscribe to the eastern religions’ idea of reincarnation.

Yao Yuan did not reply but instead turned to face Zhang

Heng. The young man was shaking all over; even the cigar between his fingers was vibrating beyond control.

Yao Yuan moved to give him a healthy slap on the shoulder and say, “Stop being so afraid, Zhang Heng! I handpicked you myself to join the Hope, didn’t I? In spite of you looking like you were a sleazebag, a drug addict, and a nobody, I saw the potential in you! Understand that your past doesn’t define you, and I believe that under that shady appearance hid a courageous, trustworthy young man. In fact, I have seen glimpses of this man

a few times before. He appeared when we went searching for your father and again when you appealed for the safety of those women! So channel that courage within your heart, because I know it's in there! It's time to be that man!"

That speech injected a healthy dose of confidence into Zhang Heng and miraculously his shaking stopped. In fact, a warm, fuzzy feeling started spreading all over his body. He felt prepared to face the world.

“Alright, it’s almost five. Time to go!” With that, Yao Yuan slammed down his helmet and walked towards the entrance of the shuttle. With an energetic gait, both Jay and Zhang Heng followed.

The exact plan had already been hashed out after an intense discussion between Yao Yuan, representatives from the Academy, and the rest of the Black Star Unit. The mission was appropriately named Operation Hail Mary!

The three generators in the Hope would be simultaneously activated to support the initiation of its anti-gravitational system.

After calculating this planet's gravity, the Hope would take about half an hour to rise to the height of five thousand feet, that is if the plants that adhered to the ship haven't completely drained it dry by that point... The success of the mission hinged on the difference between the Hope having its energy passively drained and it actively feeding its energy to the plants.

As the energy output increased, the number of plants was expected to increase as well. When the Hope lifted off the ground, the plan was to pull the plants along with it and hopefully, with a strong enough pull, the heart of the plant could be lifted up into the surface. And that would be when the shuttle would strike.

“The shuttle only has two minutes because after that, its electrical circuit will fry and the anti-gravitational system will be rendered useless. Therefore, we

have to insert the virus into the heart of the plants and return to the Hope within these fateful two minutes, or else...”

Yao Yuan sat in the pilot seat and took a deep breath. Then he told Jay, who sat beside him, “So your mission is very important. You have to manipulate this heart to appear within two minutes. I don’t care how you do it; create as ludicrous a lie as you want, just make sure the target appears in two, no, scrap that, one minute. And if you fail, then we will be unable to return to the Hope, and even if we can, the Hope will be stranded on

this planet forever...”

“Okay, stop!” Jay slapped his own face, hoping to snap into focus, then he yelled, “I can’t stand that much pressure! Even when I participated in college football, my coach didn’t pressure me so much...”

“Then change that pressure into motivation!” yelled Yao Yuan in return before pulling the engine lever. Sparks flew across the hangar as the shuttle slid across the rails with an incredible speed...

Like a burning arrow, the
shuttle shot out of the Hope and
into the dark!

Chapter 42: Let the Hope Fly! (1)

The moment the shuttle shot out of the Hope, it seemed like light was immediately sucked out of the room. For Zhang Heng and Jay, the drastic change took some time to get used to, but probably due to his heightened reflexes, Yao Yuan adapted to it much easier and faster.

When they turned back around, the only source of light was the Hope that shone before them like a gleaming lantern. At that moment, the Hope was

already about four hundred meters in the air and pulling it down were a few vine-like tendrils. Flares and sparks flew at the places where the tendrils were latched onto the Hope, and one could safely assume that the great store of energy was getting siphoned away. In fact, later reports showed that the higher the altitude the Hope climbed to, the faster its energy was drained.

“Starting two minute countdown! One hundred and nineteen seconds, one hundred and eighteen seconds...” Yao Yuan screamed as he initiated

the shuttle's anti-gravitational system.

“Jay! Quick! Do what you need to do! I don't care how, just do it!” Yao Yuan yelled again as he steered the ship nearer to the ground.

It was obvious from the way he stood and looked that Jay was channeling great effort to re-enter that superhuman state. However, it simply wouldn't happen. Instead of a great silence, he remained steeped in the raucous around him.

“One hundred and ten seconds,
one hundred and nine
seconds...”

“Jay!” screamed Yao Yuan once
more, and this time even Zhang
Heng joined in.

“I know! I know! Stop
pressuring me!” Jay shouted in
return.

Nevertheless, this mysterious
state that Jay was looking for

wasn't as accessible as many wanted it to be. No matter how loud the two men screamed at him, if it was not meant to be, it was not meant to be.

“Ninety-three seconds, ninety-two seconds...”

“We’re entering the danger zone now! Jay! Why don’t you try envisioning imminent danger!” screamed Yao Yuan as his voice rose to an inhuman volume.

“Screw you! My butt is safely rested here in this shuttle; what kind of imminent danger could I convincingly envision? In fact, why don’t you throw me out of the shuttle? Maybe that’ll help!” Jay retorted sarcastically.

Zhang Heng’s voice could be heard coming from the other side of the room, offering, “Then think of something memorable, something significant. Just focus!”

“Yes, that’s right... Jay! Ignore the countdown, just focus... No

matter what, even if everything fails, know that we believe in you!” Yao Yuan screamed with his voice rising over that of Zhang Heng’s.

We believe in you!

We believe in you...

A football competition at XX High School ...

“Jay, that was awesome! You

were the most agile player on the field! I'm sure you'll be picked as the quarterback!"

"Jay, quick, run! The goal is just in front of you... Yes! We won, we actually did it! Team two actually beat team one and it's all thanks to you, Jay!"

"Congratulations, Jay. You have made it into the university's official football team. Now go on and tell your parents the great news; I'm sure they will be so proud of you. But remember to tell them to come and watch the

college league matches,
hahaha...”

“That’s wonderful news! I’m so proud of you, Jay, my boy. Of course, we will be there for you. We would not miss this match for the world. In fact, have I told you that your old man was once a football player? So when you’re a big star, remember to tell the reporters that it was your old man that taught you how to play football in the first place!”

Match day...

“Jay, I’m sorry, but your spot has been given away. Nothing personal... He just runs faster than you.”

“Jay, don’t listen to that lousy coach. The guy got the spot because he was the school director’s son. You are still the fastest of us all!”

“...Is that so? The reality is, Jay, we didn’t see you on the field. Haven’t we gone through this already, son? Stop lying to your parents... You are such a

disappointment...”

No, I’m not lying to you, I’m really not...

A liar...

But you are a liar!

A Harvard graduate?! Please, you can’t even speak French! This relationship is so over... Now get out of my face!

You liar! Your father was no football star!

You lying piece of...

So what if I'm a liar?!

Jay suddenly yelled, but weirdly enough, no sound came out of his mouth. In fact, all the raucous that had been clogging his mind had ceased... It was like the walls of the shuttle melted away and he was thrown into

the immensely deep and quiet cosmos...

“There is an energy that is as big as a planet here! So big it could blow up an entire planet!”

The lie reverberated within the walls of the shuttle before dissipating into space and the great beyond... Travelling on a medium that was unknown to man, a medium that was far less destructive to sound waves than air; Jay's voice travelled into many unexpected places, even places that were underground...

After that, tremors were felt all over the desert surface. The magnitude was so devastating that it rivaled a magnitude 12 earthquake!

Right underneath the Hope, small cracks started to form and they gradually linked to create a deep chasm. Even viewed from the Hope's altitude, the chasm, which was at least a hundred times the size of the spaceship itself, seemed to be bottomless.

紧接着.....

The ground continued to grumble...

And a giant ball of moss rose from the chasm. It was almost as big as the planet itself!

It was covered with tendrils and each of them was about the size of the Hope. Despite their size, however, they were incredibly agile. In fact, a few of them had already wound themselves around the Hope. Some tried to grab at Yao Yuan's shuttle, but he evaded them all.

And that was lucky because at the speed they were going, one hit and they would easily be swatted down from the air.

“Great job, Jay! Now, hang on to your seat! But keep focusing on what you’re doing. Don’t stop!”

Yao Yuan pulled another lever and the rear of the shuttle exploded in flames. Simultaneously, he yelled, “Zhang Heng, start focusing as well. Yell when you sense danger incoming!”

“Sixty-two seconds, sixty-one seconds, sixty seconds...”

Like riding a bucking mare, Yao Yuan was out of his mind trying to steer the shooting shuttle towards his desired destination. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't seem to pinpoint that location. Unable to take his own advice, he remained out of the desired superhuman state.

Suddenly, Zhang Heng shrieked, “Be careful! Something is coming at us from

our left!”

In that moment, Yao Yuan returned to that sensation of complete serenity.

With a slight nudge at the control stick and with a grace that was uncommon to any vehicles, the shuttle did a right swerve and successfully avoided the incoming tendril. Yao Yuan felt like he had gotten more familiar with his ability.

He knew that he was able to

sense the projection of malice, but later he found out that, like Ying, he could have a perfect view of his surroundings. Like Zhang Heng, he too could sense danger. In fact, other than Jay's knack at mental manipulation, he appeared to have access to the powers of all the others homo evolutis.

However, he realized that he was a jack of all trades but master of none. After some comparisons, he noticed that his power of sight was not as detailed as Ying's, his power of divination was not as clear as Zhang Heng's, and his power of

malice tracking was not as attuned as Ebon's...

While all of these were going through his mind, his hand had not left the control stick. Under his command, the shuttle drifted its way through the maze of tendrils towards the heart of the plant.

At about two hundred meters away from their destination, Yao Yuan could suddenly see clearly the formation of this moss ball. It was not a whole entity but rather an amalgamation of

millions and millions of minute algae-like plants.

With just the wiggling tendrils latticing each other, these algae plants had coagulated to form a formidable presence. This confirmed the presence of a hive mind. Furthermore, with activities of this scale, it appeared as if the hive mind was not as they had suspected. It was simple but only appeared so because it had been restricted by certain limitations.

As the shuttle got closer to their

target, the giant tendrils around them became even more active. Some even started disintegrating into smaller vines, forming a wall blocking their way.

“Fifty-three seconds, fifty-two seconds...”

The shuttle was less than a hundred meters to the heart of the plant. If weren't for the obstruction from this vine wall, they would have reached it within seconds... However, navigating this dense jungle of vines would require at least

another fifty seconds...

“Sit tight!” roared Yao Yuan as he turned the shuttle’s rocket engine to its highest. Like a loose arrow, the shuttle shot straight ahead.

Hundreds of tendrils and vines moved to block its path. However, like an energized lightning bug, the shuttle weaved through the plant barricades with surprising ease... It was truly a sight to behold!

Nevertheless, the shuttle had its vehicular limitations. Made not of flexible tendons but solid steel, there were simply corners that it couldn't turn. At about thirty meters from the heart, it had finally run into a deadlock!

“There are dangers coming from our left, and right, and back... No! They're coming from all sides!” wailed a frantic Zhang Heng.

“Damn these plants! Hold on to your seats!”

With another push at the stick, the shuttle righted itself, attempting an emergency break. A snapping sound emanating from the back of the shuttle followed. It sounded like something at the rear had been hit. A distraught Jay shouted,

“Go away! There’s nothing here! The energy is above us; it has flown into the sky!”

The tendrils that were closing in on the shuttle suddenly stopped. They waved their slender bodies around as if

sniffing the air, then they surged towards the sky even though there was nothing there...

The rocket engine was badly broken, but fortunately, the shuttle itself was still comparatively intact. There was even a small burst of flame still spluttering from the engine. However, the propulsion was barely strong enough to keep them afloat, much less push them towards the plant's heart.

They were about ten meters from it. The target was right

before their eyes as the shuttle floated sweetly right beyond its periphery.

“Forty-seven seconds, forty-six seconds...”

Chapter 43: Let the Hope Fly! (2)

Time cruelly moved on, paying no heed to the many lives that wished for it to slow down...

At about ten meters away from their destination, the anti-gravitational system was keeping the shuttle barely afloat. Its rocket engine was too damaged to manage more than a slow crawl. But the reality was that they didn't have the time to slowly inch towards their target.

Yao Yuan sat silently at his seat before getting up abruptly and rushing to the shuttle entrance. He yelled, “You two keep the shuttle balanced. You don’t need to pilot it, just keep it balanced!”

On the way to the door, Yao Yuan swiped a black box that was hanging on the wall. Before the two men realized what was happening, Yao Yuan was already prepared to jump out of the shuttle. Secured only by a safety cable, Yao Yuan held in one hand the black box and in the other an army knife as he jumped over the distance that separated them from the heart

of the plants.

With a little pre-jump acceleration, it was technically not a hard gap to close. But to jump with the realization that a slip could cost one's life was mind-blowing enough to stun both Zhang Heng and Jay. After they managed to recollect themselves, the two men looked at each other and said, almost in unison, "Do you know how to control a shuttle?"

To which the answer was a collective silence.

Part of Yao Yuan's willingness to commit to that jump was his faith in the tensile strength of the security cable. The rope was made for usage in space, so it was at least one hundred meters long and as strong as steel. With its help, Yao Yuan flung himself across the chasm. In mid-flight, at a distance where he could reach out and literally touch the outer wall of the heart, Yao Yuan unsheathed his knife and stuck it firmly into the wall.

Inertia dragged him further down another ten meters. When

he finally stopped sliding, he quickly removed the knife. To his horror, the blade disintegrated right before his eyes. Missing not even a beat, he tossed the knife away and stuck one of his hands into the open crack in the wall while the other hand frantically unlocked the black box.

Resting within the box were three thick hypodermic syringes filled with plant virus. Because they were strapped within their case, they were hard to release using only one hand. In an effort to maintain his balance, Yao Yuan had to lean half of his

upper body into the crack. When he felt relatively secured, he moved his hand out of the crack to help with the syringe strap only to realize the spacesuit around his hand had already been completely eaten.

That might, however, turn out to be a blessing in disguise because for a job as delicate as fiddling with a strap, the protection of a space suit might be more of a hindrance than an aid. During that moment, Yao Yuan unconsciously entered a state of deep calm and all his powers decided to kick into high gear. Within that peaceful

cocoon of silence, the details of his surroundings were rising up to meet him, a voice was in his head was offering guidance, and a deep attunement to the emergence of danger and malice was forged. In a way, he felt very much unlike his human self.

With his hand curled firmly around the syringe, he wiggled his hand out of the box and fiercely shoved the syringe into the heart's outer wall!

As predicted by the scientists, as soon as the virus was injected,

the plant started shriveling. In a matter of seconds, the lush outer walls turned into a dry husk.

Despite having the world around him falling apart, Yao Yuan stayed in his position. He was silently timing himself. With a sudden burst of speed, instead of turning back out, Yao Yuan picked himself up and charged deeper into the heart. Ignoring the fact that his spacesuit was slowly breaking apart, he stormed ahead while each of his hands were gripping the remaining two syringes tightly.

Back on the shuttle, a crisp snap could be heard. When both Jay and Zhang Heng twisted their heads around, what they saw was the end of cable flapping in the wind...

“That crazy man! He really does want to be humanity’s savior, does he not? Why did I believe him when he said he had faith in me?!” Jay growled angrily as he sprinted towards the pilot seat.

“Zhang Heng, be prepared to raise our elevation! Get this

thing higher!”

Jay grabbed hold of another secured security cable and tied it to his spacesuit. However, as he neared the open door, the fire that had been burning in his eyes seemed to have dwindled. He started to hesitate.

“Damn that man! His faith in me is going to cost both of our lives!”

Yelling, Jay jumped out of the shuttle...

“Thirty-one seconds, thirty seconds...”

At the same time, Yao Yuan was essentially squeezing blindly ahead. He couldn't confidently tell what direction he was going in in the semi darkness, but he knew that he had been circling around a basketball-sized object. It had left such an impression on him because its sturdy exterior felt so drastically different from the plump plant fibers.

As a realization dawned upon

him, he swiftly pierced the two syringes into the object. Then he pressed down hard on them, injecting every single drop of the virus into it.

Right there and then, Yao Yuan felt an overwhelming emotion sweep over him. It was fear. Pure and unfettered fear. Before he could understand it, the pressure that had been pressing in on him suddenly released. The walls that he had been squeezing through had shriveled and shrunk. Before him, a semi-transparent capsule was revealed. The capsule was connected to numerous

transference pipes and those pipes themselves were connected to more capsules that Yao Yuan realized littered the room. He surveyed his surroundings and realized that he had been standing in the heart of the plant all along. Unlike how the Academy had speculated, the heart was not a giant capsule but rather a room filled with a sea of capsules, each containing a type of mineral or energy crystal.

The spot where Yao Yuan had stuck the syringes were near the bottom of one such capsule. Yao Yuan could see the virus spread

across the plant through the
interconnecting tubes.
Beginning from that one
capsule, the plant started to wilt.

More plant walls started to
collapse as the virus travelled
through the tubes. In less than
ten seconds, it had even reached
the tendrils underneath the
Hope, killing them in one go.
This was a testament to how
strong and advanced these
plants' lives were, a strength
that ironically enough became
its downfall.

Caught in the collapse, Yao Yuan lost his footing and started falling towards the ground. Only then did he realize that he was almost naked; the spacesuit and the security cable had entirely fallen away. What he had on him was only the basketball-esqe object that he instinctively grabbed before falling.

(Is this the end?)

With the wilting plants raining down around him, Yao Yuan closed his eyes, preparing to make his peace.

(Mission accomplished...
Finally, it's accomplished...)

(I did not opt for the easy way out. I stuck with it through to the end...)

(I did not fail you this time...)

(But I'm so tired now...)

Suddenly, Yao Yuan could hear

something cutting through the air. Unexpectedly, the thing slammed into him, almost taking his breath away. Before he could make sense of the situation, a pair of hands caught him from behind and his falling came to a sudden halt. Then he started rising in accelerating speed.

“Damn, I know you see yourself as Superman, but is that really necessary?!”

The voice behind him said sarcastically. Instantly, Yao Yuan

registered that as Jay's voice. Saying that it was a shock for the military expert was an understatement. He never expected rescue, much less one from a professional conman. If he was being honest, he doubted even his Black Star comrades would have the guts to do what Jay just did.

He kept all of his shock to himself, but his impression of this supposed criminal had improved manifold. He was, after all, a realist, and they had about ten seconds to use the shuttle to return to the Hope. In other words, they were still in

great danger, so it was not the place nor the time to be gushy with feelings.

Jay added earnestly, “I have to ask: why you had to say you have faith in me? Who would have faith in a professional liar?”

“Ah, that... No matter the reasons, you followed me onto the shuttle. That showed you have faith in me... I’m just doing the same, because is that not what partners and comrades do?” Yao Yuan replied nonchalantly, reflecting none of

the dangers they were in.

Back in the shuttle, sweat was pouring down Zhang Heng's face as his fingers flew over the control panel's buttons. It was true that he had not personally driven a shuttle, but he had been the passenger of many such vehicles before. From his memories, he could piece together the method to operate the machine. In any case, there weren't any other choices. Somewhat miraculously, he managed to switch on what was left of the rocket engine and the shuttle slowly ground its way towards the Hope.

The Hope too was climbing in height, but because of its size, it climbed at a slower speed than the smaller shuttle. Nevertheless, at that moment, the Hope was already six hundred meters off the ground while the shuttle was still hovering at around three hundred meters from the ground...

“Ten seconds, nine seconds, eight seconds...”

“Please move faster! I will not

fail my father, who gave his life for mine, Yao Yuan, and the Black Stars who gave me ample opportunity. The respect that I've earned, the friends..." Zhang Heng started bawling like a child as he navigated the shuttle towards the Hope. "...and the life that I've made, the man that I've become... I will not give up now!"

"Four seconds, three seconds, two seconds..."

They were so close to the Hope that Zhang Heng could even spot

the crowd standing by the ship's cabin entrance. They were waving their hands and yelling. Among them were a bunch of familiar faces: there were many of the Black Stars, Ying, Liu Bai, Ebon, Ning Xue, Mao Miao, Bo Li, and...

There had never been such a moment in Zhang Heng's life where the wish to live, to keep on adventuring with his friends, was so visceral...

“One second, zero...”

“It’s time to let the Hope fly!”

In spite of the completed countdown, the shuttle’s anti-gravitational system hadn’t gone completely haywire. But it was obvious that it had met its limits, as smoke started spluttering out of its many corners. It was as if the shuttle was channeling Zhang Heng’s desperate desire to live as it dragged its broken body towards the finish line...

An explosion at the rear end of the shuttle announced the death

of the anti-gravitational system. As if planned, blow-back from the explosion gave the shuttle a final push, flinging it into the Hope's open hangar. It slid across the floor before coming to a stop by slamming into a metallic wall.

The impact flattened Zhang Heng onto the control panel, knocking him on the side of his head. Before he lost consciousness, he could vaguely hear the crowd cheering. It sounded so happy, so carefree...

Chapter 44: A Desperate Departure

At an altitude of 5,000 meters, the Hope's anti-gravitational system finally regained its usual performance. Its previously slow ascent picked up speed. In the blink of an eye, the russet surrounding of Planet Sahara shifted to the inky black of the cosmos. A collective sigh of relief could be felt all over the Hope as the air of consternation hovering over its residents dispersed. People were celebrating their successful escape from that death trap of a planet.

It was around this time of celebration that Yao Yuan awoke. He was already mighty tired when Jay caught him mid falling. That combined with the many rough tumbles as the shuttle slammed into the Hope had completely knocked him out.

When he regained consciousness, he found himself safely tucked inside a hospital bed. It was a deja-vu experience because the situation was very similar to when he first awoke from Virus X. Doctors and

nurses sans the hazmat suits circled him, admitting medicine, check-ups, and bandages.

Pinpricks of pain shot through his system when he tried moving his hands and feet. The pain was a source of comfort because that meant the plants didn't cause any nerve damage.

"How long have I been unconscious?" croaked Yao Yuan.

After the initial shock, all of the

attending doctors were glad to see their major awake. The leading doctor said, "Major, you weren't out of it for long; it was only about ten minutes. However, you survived a harsh tumble before you lost consciousness, and that was without the protection of a space suit. So, Major, please rest easy while we take a few x-rays to ensure that you aren't suffering from any broken bones and concussions..."

Shaking his head, Yao Yuan adamantly rejected, "Sorry, doctor, I can't do that. Now is not the time to rest. After you

are finished with the bandages, bring me a wheelchair. I need to get to central command."

The European middle-aged doctor dithered before finally yielding, "Alright, Major, if you are so inclined... But we hope you will agree to a full body-check after this business is over."

"Of course. I need to know whether those parasitic plant spores had burrowed their way into my body," Yao Yuan joked. Then he took a forty-winks while waiting for the wheelchair

to arrive.

He was so tired...

The superhuman state was undoubtedly strong. In fact, they wouldn't have survived Planet Sahara without it. The last mission alone would have been impossible without access to that mysterious state.

Jay and Zhang Heng were, in all senses of the word, the Hope's heroes. Without their powers, the mission would have

a zero percent success rate. It was thanks to Jay's power at mental manipulation and Zhang Heng's divination that the virus was deployed so successfully.

The superhuman state came with its own complications though. The exertion it had on one's physical and mental vigor was astronomical. It was enervating. As if proving the point, Yao Yuan spotted out of the corner of his eye both Jay and Zhang Heng soundly asleep. He envied them deeply because his short nap barely helped. What he wouldn't give to lie down there and enjoy a restful

sleep.

But he knew it was not the time for sleep.

He could hear the sound of rejoice echoing through the Hope. But for Yao Yuan, it belied people's desperate need for safety and stability. And at the moment, the Hope was everything they had.

Yao Yuan could almost pick out the thread of worry weaving through the cheers because he of

all people knew that the Hope's excursion to Planet Sahara was not without its heavy price!

For one, they had lost an incredible amount of energy. The amount of energy that had been drained was massive enough to support almost two space warps!

For another, they had not found any radioactive minerals on the planet. Yao Yuan suspected that these had all already been converted into energy crystals by the plants. All

in all, humanity came off worse from the ordeal...

Based on initial reports, the Hope had enough energy left for one more space warp.

Even if they decided to go on with the space warp, the numbers were definitely not on their side!

To have the first warp land within a solar system system with a terrestrial planet was already in itself bordering

impossibility and the chance of continuing that streak was... indescribably small!

To give the Hope a fighting chance, Yao Yuan had to know exactly how much energy the ship had left. He also needed to have a meeting with the Academy to figure out whether it was possible to unlock the energy crystals found within the plants, and to use them as fuel for the Hope.

With these missions in mind, Yao Yuan steeled his

determination as he dragged his bandaged body out of bed.

At that moment, a few lieutenants rushed into the room. They were led by Liu Bai, who, right after stepping into the room, knelt before Yao Yuan to give him a cursory check. "I'm glad that you're doing fine, Ol' Cap'n... By the way, what is your next course of action regarding the capsule of energy crystal you brought back with you? None of us dared to move it without your orders, so it has been left sitting beside the broken shuttle. The scientists have been notified of this, so what's the plan?"

"Energy crystal?" questioned Yao Yuan. He recalled the baggage that he had grasped before falling. He originally thought it housed some sort of mineral.

"The crystal itself should be quite stable. If not, it would have exploded during the tumble... But to be safe, keep it out of the civilians' reach. For all we know, it could be highly radioactive. Let the scientists do their analysis first."

Nodding his head, Liu Bai added earnestly, "Yes, sir... Ol' Cap'n, the doctor told me of your request. I believe you should take a longer rest; God knows you deserve it."

Yao Yuan only laughed wryly. Other than the few scientists who were directly responsible for the Hope's store of energy, Yao Yuan had told no one about the spaceship's dangerously low energy level. He had been trying to breach the topic with the Black Star Unit, but he couldn't do it with so many unrelated personnel in hearing range. He didn't want to sow the seeds of

panic.

Ten minutes later, Yao Yuan was already in central command, having a video meeting with the few selected scientists.

"Major, the Hope's current energy level has been calculated... We are relatively confident that it can still support one more space warp. After that, the remaining energy could keep the Hope running for another 25 days, give or take five days," said a frowning scientist as he

glossed over his report.

Yao Yuan guzzled down the tea that someone handed him before replying, "How about solar energy? Hasn't the Hope been using its solar panels to gather solar energy?"

Another scientist interjected to pan the idea. "I'm sorry, Major, but that won't work. The level of energy the Hope uses is too high to be supported by solar energy. Even if we transfer all the solar energy away from the biomes, it can only supplement a third of

the ship's total energy consumption. However, due to the importance of the biomes, we really shouldn't do that unless absolutely necessary."

Yao Yuan lowered his head to think. After a minute, he asked, "How about the desert planet? Now that the heart of the plant has been vanquished, couldn't we issue another landing to search for radioactive minerals or to salvage them from the dead plants?"

A cloud of gloom eclipsed the

faces of the scientists on the screen. One of them finally said, "That would not be possible... Major, we are sorry to report, but I'm afraid that what you destroyed is only a single heart of the plants."

"A single heart of the plants? What do you mean?" Yao Yuan demanded.

The scientist turned to whisper to one of his interns that were standing by. After a few seconds, a window appeared on screen. It showed the map of Planet

Sahara. Circling a spot, the scientist explained, "Major, this area is around where the Hope landed. As you can see, as big as the Hope may be, it occupies only a small space when viewed in relation to the whole planet's land mass. However, it didn't take long for the plants to get attached to the Hope. This could only mean that the heart for this particular set of plants wasn't that far away from us. If we take into account the size of the heart that we saw and the size of this planet, we can safely speculate that there are almost forty hearts occupying this planet. They are evenly spread across Planet Sahara, and it was rather fortunate for us to stumble into

only one of them..."

The more Yao Yuan looked at the graphs and statistics on screen, the more he was convinced of the scientist's argument. If there really was only one heart, then it meant that they had been extremely unlucky to have landed within its gathering zone. The odds of that happening had also been calculated, it was one over forty... It was not an odd Yao Yuan favored.

In other words, the biggest

possibility was that the planet housed more such plant hearts.

"Major, this is why we are incredibly adamant against another landing. This is a chance that we are unwilling to take. We can't afford to have any more energy drained..." the scientist offered despairingly.

Gritting his teeth, Yao Yuan sat brooding. Finally, he sighed. "I understand. We can't gamble with the lives of 120000 people. But space warping is also a risk, a bigger risk in fact... Then

again, since we can't land on this planet, how about other planets in this solar system? Have there been any other discoveries?"

An astronomer stepped forth to answer. "Major, we have managed to detect six more planets in this solar system. Three of them are terrestrial planets and the other three are gas giants. But regretfully, getting to the nearest terrestrial planet will take at least one month. The furthest planet requires us to travel for almost a year before we can reach it... In conclusion, they are all too far from where we are. Other than

the space warp technology, the rest of the Hope is equipped with Earth's technology. We still aren't advanced enough to be able to cross great distances in a short span of time."

"Is that so?"

Yao Yuan closed his eyes. After a while, his head dipped. He remained still for so long that the people around him thought that he had accidentally fallen asleep. Suddenly, he said, with a pained expression, "Then do the space warp. We can't afford to

waste more time staying put. We have tried our best and so we shall leave it all to God. May he smile upon us... We will prepare for the space warp in an hour. In the meantime, Lieutenant Wong will be the acting captain. It is instrumental to save every single ounce of energy possible because we have to be prepared for all situations..."

Yao Yuan's voice slowed before finally tailing off as he slipped into slumber...

Everyone else who was present

gazed silently at their leader's sleeping profile. This was a man who had saved the lives of 120000 people twice; once on Earth and once on Planet Sahara. In the eyes of these men and women shone immeasurable respect and reverence.

The scientists ended the video meeting and then everyone started retreating quietly out of the room. Central command descended into a pool of silence with the exception of Yao Yuan's light snoring and the pitter-patter of receding footsteps...

For the people that left the room, their hearts were as heavy as their footsteps.

They had survived a supposedly doomed planet, a miraculous space warp, and an industrialized planet species, but what would their future hold? How much longer would this journey be?

No one truly knew...

An hour later, the Hope blinked out of this starry solar system,

erasing all traces of its existence.
It was as if it had never really
been there...

Chapter 45: A Cradle of Stars

It was the deepest sleep Yao Yuan had had in a long time. He dreamt of a great many things.

From his childhood years to his new recruit days, from mundane paperwork to dangerous gunfights. Finally, he dreamt of her...

"You silly oaf, promise me you'll stay alive. No matter how tired you might be, you are not

allowed to surrender. The most I'm willing to allow is a short nap, like the one you're taking right now..."

"But... I'm so tired."

"I know... but you can't give up. You are not only my hope, but the hope of a lot more people, so don't give up, don't let these people's hope die with you..."

"I promise you, but please don't go... I know this is a dream, but I want you to stay with me..."

Yao Yuan gradually lifted his eyelids, hoping to see her eyes staring back at him. Alas, what greeted him instead were the lights dancing on the room's metallic ceiling. Resigned to the cruelty of reality, he closed his eyes and went back to sleep.

He sighed inwardly. Dreams will be dreams...

When he woke up again 15 minutes later, he felt more like himself as he started instinctively observing his

surroundings.

Yao Yuan knew that the room he was in was part of the Barracks' infirmary. He remembered falling asleep after giving his orders, so he assumed that some medical units had transported him here afterwards.

Yao Yuan noticed that the scars and wounds on his body had already begun to heal and the pain had lessened significantly. Based on the degree of convalesce, he figured he had

been asleep for about one whole day.

The steady flow of light from the room's lighting meant that there had been no issue of short-circuiting. That combined with a lack of noise and commotion told Yao Yuan that the last space warp had been successful, or at least nothing momentous had changed within the Hope.

Then Yao Yuan sat up and pushed the emergency button by his bed.

Following that, sounds of footsteps could be heard coming from the outside corridor. A group of doctors and nurses came into the room and Yao Yuan was glad to spot a familiar face among them. The leading doctor that had been assigned to him when he first came to after the shuttle crashed appeared to be leading this crew of medical personnel as well. With a kind countenance, said doctor strode to Yao Yuan's side and started to pore over the medical apparatus that had been set up by Yao Yuan's bed.

"Major, you appear to have

recovered nicely. Apart from some minor abrasions and cuts, there is no evidence of bone fractures or a concussion. Remember to apply this balm over the wounds and make sure to stay away from water. You'll be back to top form in no time." The doctor smiled as he handed Yao Yuan the medicine.

After the nurses removed all the tubes attached to his body, Yao Yuan swung off the bed to give his body a stretch, then he remembered to ask, "How about Zhang Heng and Jay? Are they doing well?"

The doctor kindly replied, "Both of them are doing fine. They collapsed from fatigue, nothing serious. They left the infirmary after they awoke from their rest. If I'm not mistaken, Lieutenant Zhang Heng is still somewhere around the Barracks, while Mister Jay has returned to the civilian campgrounds."

"That's good to know. In any case, I would like to thank all of you for your service," said Yao Yuan as he approached each doctor and nurse to shake their

hands. "I have to take my leave now. There are still many things that remain to be done. Thank you again."

The leading doctor pulled him in for an embrace. "No, Major. We should be thanking you and the two young heroes. Without the three of you, we would have been stuck on leave Planet Sahara... So please accept our gratitude, hero of the Hope!"

Yao Yuan patted the doctor on his shoulder and removed himself from the embrace.

When he finally left the room, he was surprised to find two black-star close guards standing by. They saluted Yao Yuan and stood squarely in position.

"Fetch me an electromobile and get me to command central," ordered Yao Yuan after he saluted the pair in return.

On the electromobile, Yao Yuan started asking about the things that had occurred while he was asleep.

"According to the doctors, I've been out of it for about 36 hours... What have happened in that time? Have there been issues with the space warp? And where is our current location? Has the Academy found any hospitable planets nearby?" Yao Yuan asked in quick succession. He was particularly emphatic about the last question because its answer would decide the fate of 120000 people.

A concerned look passed between the two guards before one of them spoke up. "Nothing worth reporting has happened in the past 36 hours, sir. The one

thing of note is that a petition has been gathering support among the civilians. They want to have a large-scale carnival to celebrate the Hope's successful escape from Planet Sahara. There has also been a growing request to have a memorial for the lives that have been lost. The people wish for their families' and friends' sacrifice be recognized and honored."

"We can proceed with the carnival as long as it is not too demanding of the Hope's store of supplies. And of course we will be honoring the lives of those who have fallen; it is the right

thing to do. However, since most of the bodies were lost on Planet Sahara, planning a memorial will be a bit tricky. Perhaps we can have a symbolic burial. We can discuss the details after we have secured the permission of the family members..." Yao Yuan explained before adding, "Is that all? How about the space warp? Which star system have we landed in? And are there any visible planets around us?"

The two guards started to stutter; they were trying but failing to provide a sufficient answer. Right then, the electromobile passed through a

long corridor. It was a walkway that bordered the outer perimeter of the Hope and had a transparent wall that allowed one to view the scenery outside. Yao Yuan unconsciously turned his head to take in the view...

Instead of the gloomy star-scape that he had come to expect, he was greeted with a luminous band of twinkling stars... Against a deeply cerulean backdrop, multiple light novas exploded across the space as stars came in and out of existence...

The majestic view made Yao Yuan's jaw drop to the floor. He had so many questions, but he knew had to keep them in until they reached central command. After all, there was no telling who might be listening in. When they finally arrived at their destination, the rest of the Black Stars and about ten scientists were already waiting. Without preamble, Yao Yuan launched into his questions. "What is happening outside the Hope? Have we warped into some weird dimension? Or are we stuck in some gas giants? No, that's not possible because if that were true, the Hope would be crushed by its high pressure by now... Then what exactly is

going on? Wasn't space supposed to be dark? Why is it almost as bright as daylight out there?"

The gathered scientists were mostly astrophysicists. They were led by Alan, who volunteered to answer Yao Yuan's questions. "No, we are most certainly still in space, and we have not crossed the wall of dimensions... To suggest that is preposterous because how could we as three-dimensional creatures even possibly survive in other dimensions? Anyway, what I'm trying to say is that space-warping will not warp us across dimensions. We are still

in outer space and definitely not in the body of some gas giant. As a matter of fact... according to our analysis and discussion, I highly suspect that we have somehow found ourselves in the middle of a nebula."

"A nebula?" echoed Yao Yuan incredulously.

Ever since they had located the Hope, Yao Yuan had spent plenty of time furbishing his space knowledge. He felt that it was necessary for him to be familiar with entities that the Hope

might one day stumble across. In the course of his study, he had learnt about neutron stars, white dwarfs, red giants, supernovas, and black holes.

Incidentally, he had also learnt about nebulas...

"That can't be right! Nebulas are supposed to be expansive. It is because of Earth's extreme distance from known nebulas that we got the impression that they are compact, bright, and hold a shape. In reality, if we are in the middle of one, it still

should look like normal space. Or to be specific, nebulas are so big in size that we should not be aware that we are in one, because it would not look any different from other stretches of the cosmos! In fact, parts of it shouldn't even have stars because they are spaces of vacuum. Isn't that right?" Yao Yuan queried.

While the group of scientists was hamstrung by the complexity of the situation, a young girl shuffled forward. The girl was Bo Li. She sidled up to Yao Yuan and explained in a soft voice, "Indeed, Major, you are

right. For normal nebulas, we would not have this spectacle. However, if you take out the other possible explanations, this is the only logical explanation left."

Yao Yuan looked askance at Bo Li for some time before adding, "Let's say you're right. Then how would you explain this anomalous nebula we are witnessing?"

Bo Li answered stoically, "There is only but one logical explanation... This nebula

around us is collecting itself to form a new galaxy. And based on our readings, there is a high possibility that a newborn star has already been created. Our spectrometer had detected two distinct spectrums of light from this nebula. One of them is red, which we have found to correlate to the radioactive waves of the nebula itself. The other color is, of course, blue. And since only a star's light could be bright enough to overwrite that of its nebula, we could safely assume that a blue, newborn star has already been born...

In other words, the nebula, or nebulous matter, that you see around us is the cradle for a new stellar system..."

A white dwarf is what stars like the Sun become after they have exhausted their nuclear fuel. Near the end of its nuclear burning stage, this type of star expels most of its outer material, creating a planetary nebula.

Red giants are stars that have exhausted the supply of hydrogen in their cores and have begun thermonuclear fusion of hydrogen in a shell surrounding

the core. They have radii tens to hundreds of times larger than that of the Sun. However, their outer envelope is lower in temperature, giving them a reddish-orange hue.

Chapter 46: A Reversal!

Encountering a nebula in space is not something that is particularly rare. At least, it is more common than encountering a neutron star or a supernova.

A nebula is a diffusive matter that spreads over a massive stretch of space, and the larger among them could cover more than ten light years of distance. To put that into perspective, a ray of sunlight needs almost nine hours to travel from the sun to Pluto. Humans, with our

current technology, would take nine years to travel from Earth to Pluto, and that is if the party doesn't perish in the perilous journey!

When one considers that a light-year is equivalent to the distance light travels in a year, or 9.5 trillion kilometers, the fact that a nebula could be more than ten light-years in size is mind-boggling...

It is simply impossible for man to travel across such a distance. The journey would take about

one hundred thousand years, a number that is even bigger than the age of human civilization!

That was why when Yao Yuan was given the news that the Hope was stuck in the middle of a nebula, his expression instantly dimmed. Even though they still hadn't figured out how big the nebula was, the smallest of them would be one light-year in size. Getting the Hope out of that alone would be a task bordering on the impossible!

He knew that the Hope's store

of energy couldn't support another space warp. They only had enough energy left to keep the Hope running at its optimum settings for another 25 days... Even if they turned off all the unnecessary electrical systems and channeled all that energy to the engine room, getting out of the nebula would be inconceivable.

At the end of the day, no matter how hard they tried to conserve energy, the Hope would retain at most 30 more days of normal functions... After that, the Hope would be nothing more than a glorified space coffin!

To leave the nebula in under 30 days... that was truly a fool's dream...

"So, a nebula... Has the Academy found out how big this nebula is?" Yao Yuan sighed resignedly.

The scientists were at a loss. Only Alan came forth to answer. "Major, no, we haven't, and we couldn't even if we wanted to... With our current technology, we can't tell you exactly how big this nebula is. Major, you have to

understand that everything we currently know about nebulas is speculation. We could try to calculate the distance based on known hypotheses and formulas, but how valid those results would be... There is no guarantee.

"Also, this nebula is covered in a layer of static charge. This blue sheen we are witnessing is evidence of that. This is another hindrance because we don't have the technology to analyze static charges. Furthermore, our telescope can't see past this static layer to analyze the nebula's inner matter... So,

there is no conclusive way of telling how big this nebula is, nor how far we are from its edges."

The gravity of their situation was brought to the forefront with Alan's frank words. Suffocated by despair, the room went silent.

Even Yao Yuan could only muster a lame response. "is that so..?"

Shattering the silence, a young

man offered timidly, "Actually, we still might have one last hope left..."

Everyone in the room turned to look at the young man. His face immediately registered in Yao Yuan's mind. This was the young man who first figured out that the alien plant species would not have been immunized against Earth's plant virus.

Yao Yuan said, "I remember you. It is thanks to your brilliant hypothesis that we had a fighting chance at escaping

Planet Sahara. Tell me, what's your name?"

The young man, who appeared to have an Arabian and European mixed heritage, faltered before answering, "My name is Ivan Mohammed bin Rashad... My friend usually calls me Ivan. You can call me that too, sir."

"It is nice to make your acquaintance, Ivan. You've mentioned a last hope, what would that be?" encouraged Yao Yuan.

Ivan was obviously stressed out by the weight of all the attention. Even though he had been recently promoted from a temporary intern to an official member of the Academy, he was still a bright-eyed teen in his early twenties. To know that the lives of 120000 people hinged on his hypothesis was a big pressure to bear.

He took some time arranging his thoughts before voicing them carefully. "Major, my suggestion has nothing to do with the nebula because that is

not my field of study... But I do know that we have to get out it and the Hope might still have an emergency store of energy to help us accomplish that!"

Intrigue was palpable in the room. At that moment, Yao Yuan could hear a voice in his head, whispering two fateful words,

"Energy crystal!"

The two words were simultaneously echoed by Ivan. With a serious tone, he

continued, "Based on our previous experiment, the alien plants have to absorb at least 10000 watts of electricity to form a 0.1 cubic millimeters sized energy crystal..."

Yao Yuan interjected, "Wait a minute, by watts, do you mean... du? That is 0.1 cubic millimeters of energy crystal contains 50000 Du of electrical energy, is that correct?"

.

"Du?" All of the scientists, including Ivan, frowned at this unfamiliar term.

Bo Li, who was still standing beside Yao Yuan, muttered under her breath, "Dumbass," before adding more clearly, "Yes, one thousand watts is equal to one du of electricity. Watts is the technical term, while du is what we Chinese use colloquially."

Yao Yuan smiled half-heartedly at Bo Li, and urged Ivan to continue.

"If we calculate the conversion rate, the energy crystal Major carried back, which is about 1.5 billion cubic millimeters, contains **one trillion and fifty billion** watts of energy!" said Ivan excitedly.

Not only were Yao Yuan and the rest of the Black Stars appropriately stunned, even some of the scientists had to ask Ivan to repeat what he just said. "How much did you say again?"

"One trillion and fifty billion watts!"

Ivan repeated affirmatively. He then retrieved from his backpack a stack of calculated data which he proceeded to pass around the room. Referring to the data, he said, "Of course, we have to take into account the amount of energy that is lost in the conversion process itself. The plants aren't superconductors, so a 100 percent conversion rate is impossible to achieve. After consulting with the physics committee, we have come to a safe assumption that for every one hundred thousand watts the plant has absorbed, it will be converted into an energy crystal

with one thousand watts of stored energy.

"So with that in mind, the energy crystal that Major carried with him should contain around one billion and fifty million watts of energy!"

The talk of numbers, and astronomical numbers at that, had Yao Yuan's head spinning. He murmured half-dazedly, "Wait, give a minute to process all this... In the year 2026, Earth's total consumption of electricity was around one

billion watts... Ivan, are you telling me that the small, basketball-sized crystal contains enough energy to power Earth's whole population for one whole year?!"

Ivan stood by his calculation by asserting, "Major, and everyone else, I know this is hard to believe, but the math doesn't lie. Of course, there might be some miscalculations along the way, but the difference would not be big enough to affect the final number... The biggest problem now is how do we tap into this reserve of energy? The technology behind the

formation of this energy crystal is way beyond our current scientific comprehension. We have trouble even understanding it, much less unlocking its stored energy."

That dropped the room into another period of silence, but before long, Bo Li started speaking.

Bo Li felt submerged again into that serene sensation and a familiar voice started whispering in her ears. She felt compelled to repeat it.

"Let him who ties the knot untie it..."

Everyone in the room, with the sole exception of one, was befuddled by the cryptic sentence. It was Yao Yuan who instantly grasped the intended meaning.

"Indeed, our current technology couldn't understand these crystals, but we do have the technology that can!" Yao Yuan sprang up excitedly. Almost shouting, he intoned, "if

the alien plant can convert energy into crystal form, perhaps we can induce it to conduct the process in reverse! This is perhaps our best shot yet!

"We still have samples of those alien plants in the lab, right? Do be careful, but you are free to use them to experiment on the energy crystal!

"Postpone the Academy's other ongoing projects! I want the whole of the Academy to focus on this one task! This is our last lifeline, people! Understand that

you have thirty days to make this work! Dismissed!"

The original number is one trillion and fifty million billion watts which can't be right because fifty million billion is already bigger than one trillion. So the numbers here and in the rest of the text have been adjusted accordingly.

Chapter 47: The Daily Scoop (1)

Sara was a 28-year-old suburban mom. She led a normal life, had a normal level of education, and was, in no uncertain terms, an important person.

In fact, according to the Hope's selection standard, she shouldn't even be allowed onboard.

There was, however, one detail

of her life that she was proud of, and that had essentially saved her life. She was married to a Navy SEAL. When the riot started, it was her husband who kept her small neighborhood intact.

Despite the pandemonium ravaging the world, Sara felt perfectly safe beside her husband. Their three-year-old daughter was her only and biggest worry.

That worry had dwindled tremendously after they were

escorted up the Hope and given residence at the Barracks. Life on the Hope, in spite of its many restrictions, was a special kind of bliss for Sara. Watching the smile that had disappeared during the traumatic riot days return to her daughter's face had brought immense joy to her heart. As time moved on, life for Sara slowly returned to the comforting suburban rhythm.

That was until a few days ago...

"Dear Mrs Thompson, on behalf of the Hope's third

infantry regiment, we would like to thank your husband for his honorable service. We will never forget the life that he has given for the greater good of the Hope, the greater good of the 120000 people on board. Because of his bravery and sacrifice, we were able to rescue 341 technicians and 74 soldiers. Again, we would like to thank you for his service. The details are all in this letter..."

Sara basically blanked out after hearing the first sentence. She had been expecting this letter ever since families around the Barracks started receiving

similar notices. She knew in her heart that she would not see her husband return, but to be handed the actual letter was still a great blow to her.

Tears would not stop falling as she shakily accepted the letter. If not for her daughter, who was holding on to her skirt, she would have keeled over right there and then.

"Mommy, please don't cry," said the little girl innocently. Sara looked at her young daughter, and in the girl's eyes reflected

the calm countenance of her father. Touched, Sara swept her daughter up into her arms and held her firmly to her heart.

Sara knew that she had to be strong for her daughter. It was her duty now to ensure that her husband's legacy lived on. She needed her daughter to know that her father was a hero!

A hero who sacrificed his life for the survival of humanity!

No, he deserved much more

than that! He should be given a proper burial! A government-validated burial! It was their responsibility because...

He died for the government. It was only fair that his death be given a notice greater than that of a stupid letter! Not only that, she had to make sure that the government ensured that the families that were left behind were properly taken care of...

And thus, hoping to seek justice for her husband and others like herself, Sara started contacting

other families who had lost family members on Planet Sahara.

She found out that about 300 people had lost their lives on Planet Sahara. The families that they left behind totaled up to about one thousand people. After Sara's intentions became known, connections between these one thousand people started forming. Finally, the day came for these family members to meet.

A multimedia room was

decided to be the venue. At this moment, about two hundred people had already gathered within and more were still coming.

"Mrs. Jennifer and Mrs. Isle, sorry I'm late," said the arriving Sara to the two ladies who were walking towards her.

One of the ladies, Mrs. Jennifer, had a mixed heritage. One half was African American and Caucasian, while the other was European. Mrs. Jennifer was about 24 years old and Mrs.

Isle was five years older. They both smiled at Sara, and the younger of the two chided her after seeing the large stack of paperwork she was carrying. "Sara, you sure did your homework!"

As the two ladies offered to share the load, Sara responded, "Yes, here are some of the laws pertaining to US military protocol on field casualties and the ensuing familial reparations. Most of these are from the states, but there are some that are from China, since... you know... our major is Chinese."

The two ladies smiled politely at the colored remark, then Mrs. Isle added diplomatically, "Yes, he is Chinese, but he is also a hero who have saved 120000 people, has maintained a continuous sense of order on the Hope... and it was his bravery that saved us again on Planet Sahara. He is a trustworthy leader."

"Oh no, you misunderstand me, Mrs. Isle. I do see him as a real hero and leader, and his government has been fair with all the dealings on the Hope. I

bear him no ill will. It's just that as a Chinese, he might not be familiar with our military's protocol, that's what I meant," explained a flustered Sara.

The other two ladies nodded their heads. They then started discussing Sara's legal findings. They knew that Sara had been busy going back and forth between the Barracks and the civilian campgrounds to ask for advice from legal experts from America, Europe, and Asia. They were very impressed by her dedication and devotion to their cause.

And it was this important cause that connected these three ladies. All three of their husbands had perished on the Planet Sahara. None of their loved ones' bodies had been retrieved, and they were left with children to fend for. These similarities in their situations had formed an unbreakable bond between the three ladies as they championed for a better funeral or memorial service and reassurance of their children's future from the government.

As Sara walked up to the

podium, she frowned when she saw the measly two hundred people who had gathered in the room. She laughed awkwardly as she spoke into the microphone. "Has there been a mix-up? Isn't today the day for the important meeting? So... why are there so few of us?"

The people who were there were equally confused. A lot of them were similarly focused on this cause, some of them even came prepared with stacks of paperwork like Sara... It seemed uncouth, but one had to ponder: was it possible that some families just didn't care enough

about their dead children,
parents, or loved ones?

A lady in the front row suddenly stood up. "Mrs. Thompson, I'm sorry, but I think I can offer some explanation," said the lady apologetically.

The lady who stood up was a pretty, bespectacled Asian woman who looked to be approaching thirty.

Sara asked kindly, "is it Mrs.

Manos? Do you know why other families aren't coming?"

Accepting the microphone that was passed to her, the Asian lady nodded her head. "I'm sure people have noticed my Chinese heritage by now, but I left China when I was young. However, ever since boarding the Hope, I've formed relationships with some of the Chinese families. In fact, some of them had family members who died on the desert planet. I talked to many of them before coming here today, and they have all refused to come along. I believe they prefer to wait for the official government

response, and I have a feeling they might be afraid to attend this meeting."

Most of the people couldn't register what Mrs. Manos was saying. Grabbing a microphone, a fifty-year-old elder stood up asking for clarification. "But it is because we have waited so long for an official government statement that this meeting is being held. We would like to discuss how to properly broach this topic with the government. But that aside, why did you say they are afraid... What are they afraid of?"

Mrs. Manos had obvious difficulties speaking freely, but under public pressure, she elaborated, "They are afraid of the government... They were too spooked by the lawlessness of the riotous days..."

An African woman stood up and asked, "That might be true, but shouldn't they feel safe now? The rules they have on this ship almost borders on personal harassment. Order reigns supreme, so why are they still afraid?"

Cornered, Mrs. Manos finally caved. "That is what they are afraid of! Current conditions on this ship reminded them too much of the dictatorial regime they once had. They are used to living under conditions where the people have no say in the administration. They are afraid that a request like ours would earn the ire of the government. They have their children to think of, they are content with how things currently are, and they do not wish for it to change!"

Chaos erupted following Mrs. Manos' statement. A sixty-something-year-old man stood up and said, in a booming voice, "Why would they think so? This is the first time the Hope has faced such a situation; we are setting a precedent for, God forbid, future repetitions. Why wouldn't they be a part of this? We aren't criminals, we are merely exercising our rights!"

"I agree, and our Major is a just hero, surely he..."

"We are helping the

government streamline their protocol, how could that get us arrested..."

"Mrs. Manos, are you sure there hasn't been miscommunication..."

People started talking over one another, so it was hard to tell who had the reason and facts. Right then, the door busted open. Two Black Star Unit members and about fifteen soldiers marched in.

That effectively settled the upheaval. Everyone turned to look at the newly arrived soldiers. Mrs. Manos was so riddled with fear that her body started shivering.

One of the two Black Stars was Liu Bai. He extricated himself from the group and ambled up the stage to the podium. He smiled genially at Sara as he took over the microphone. After giving everyone a deep bow, he said, "Major's orders: there will be a solemn star burial service in the coming days to honor the heroes who have lost their lives on Planet Sahara. At the same

time, one of the Barracks' pavilions will be renovated to build a Memorial Hall. It will be used to record the legacy of our fallen heroes so that their selfless deeds will be forever remembered by humanity.

"Regarding the issue of familial reparations, the government is open for suggestions. We will set aside a week to listen to your suggestions. But please do not worry; your loved ones' memory will be properly honored. The families will stay on their current residences and the children will receive the best education possible so that one

day they can proudly say to their friends that...

"My father, my mother, my sister, or my brother was a true hero!"

The news was greeted by a room of stunned silence. However, that quickly dissolved into soaring cheers, as if they had just won a war. Amidst the festivity was an overjoyed Mrs. Manos, who started sobbing uncontrollably like a child...

Chapter 48: The Daily Scoop (2)

“...The subject matter aside, where does their audacity to organize an illegal gathering come from? This is unacceptable!” fumed Guang Zhen.

Since there was only himself and Yao Yuan within central command, he was unrestrained in his speech.

“Do they not understand that

without Ol' Cap'n, you, leading the way, they would be dead by now! We've labored day and night keeping this ship under control. Isn't that been enough for these ungrateful sods? Have they forgotten the hell they were in before we came along? We've done everything we can for them, and how do they repay us? They complain! And a complaint that is in itself preposterous! Do they seriously think we won't be honoring our fallen comrades? The insolence!"

While Guang Zhen raged on, Yao Yuan sat calmly flipping

through a dossier. It was a report on the Hope's various zones and their individual energy consumption. Details on each zone, like their function, importance to the Hope, and population number, were all noted by the experts who did the report. Yao Yuan was looking through it because he had to decide which, if any, of the zones needed to be shut down to conserve energy.

When Guang Zhen reached a lull in his tirade, Yao Yuan lifted his head and smiled understandingly at him. "It's of no use telling me all this, Ol'

Wong. As a matter of fact, why don't you try looking at it from their perspective... You'll see that this is more than a simple meeting, it's also a test.

“Their actions aren't entirely unreasonable. For one, even though on paper we call ourselves humanity's last hope, we are still a fractured community. Just look at the civilian campgrounds. We've tried arranging the placements in such a way that people from different cultures would mingle, but as time passes, they naturally separate back into their own little groups. There is

obvious xenophobia.

“This meeting was organized and mostly attended by westerners. They are afraid their people won’t be represented and their death won’t be honored, which I find to be a valid concern. They see us as the Hope’s face of authority, and I have to admit, it is not a particularly inclusive representation. Therefore, they held this meeting to test whether we, the authority, would be receptive to their interests. There is a fear that because we are different from them culturally, we will brush

them off as unimportant.”

After taking some time to ponder Yao Yuan’s explanation, Guang Zhen asked, “Then how shall we answer? Are you considering a compromise...?”

“Not entirely a compromise,” explained Yao Yuan as he flipped through yet another page of the report. “At the moment, the Hope can’t support a democratic system, or at least the idealistic democracy that the people have in mind. Until we have a hospitable home planet, we will

not be relinquishing our military power. The community is still too young to govern itself. If I allow them to have elections, the concentration of power would be ruptured. The clash following it would only be troublesome. At this stage, the Hope needs a single consolidation of power to unite under. However, as a give and take, I have decided that the military will start to distance itself from the territory of civil rights.

“Make no mistake; the Hope’s survival depends on the progress that we make in the coming

month. So that is our focus, but if we survive that, there are two things that I plan to propose: first, each of the communities will be allowed to elect their own representatives and have their own public council. Naturally, the power of this council is limited to civil movements and, as the military leader, I will retain the right to veto any motion that I find disagreeable...

“Second, the military will remove itself in stages from cases of civil suit. We will establish a police force and civil court to take over these issues.

In terms of legislation, because of its scale, we will let the people discuss among themselves when times are more stable.”

When Yao Yuan went through his plan, Guang Zhen wanted to interject at multiple places, but every time he had stopped himself at the last moment. Noticing this, Yao Yuan chided him, “Ol’ Wong, I know you were a dedicated politician, but... everything has its place. Don’t get your priorities mixed up. Isn’t one instance of anarchy enough?”

“...I understand. I’ll take your advice and only focus on military issues from now on,” sighed Guang Zhen.

Yao Yuan smiled sympathetically, adding, “These talks of politics tire me. Let’s talk about something more interesting... the case of Homo Evolutis.”

With a serious tone, Guang Zhen replied, “I still have my reserves regarding this superhuman state that you and Ying talk about, but since you

are so sure, I guess there's no harm discussing it... You have to understand that since I'm the only one within the Black Star Unit that hasn't experienced this mysterious sensation, I have my skepticism."

"Of course... To be fair, everything we know about this Homo Evolutis is also speculation. But based on the various incidents on Planet Sahara, the fact that it's real can't be denied anymore. I've asked the Academy to look into this issue and they noted a link between this and Virus X. Here are some of their initial

findings,” said Yao Yuan as he tossed Guang Zhen the report.

Yao Yuan had skimmed the report beforehand. It read that the fever caused by Virus X might be the seed that birthed the new generation of Homo Evolutis. Another observation was that with the exception of Yao Yuan, those that survived Virus X were all under age 30, so in a way, Yao Yuan was secretly glad that the 34-year-old Guang Zhen hadn't fallen to the weird sickness.

He and Guang Zhen went way back. When he was the Black Star Unit's leader, Guang Zhen was his second in command. And when he left, Guang Zhen stepped into his shoes. Guang Zhen was great at many things, but the quality Yao Yuan was most impressed with was his prudence. He had a way of dealing with messy situations that made sure the required result would eventually pan out. That was why Yao Yuan was so willing to hand over the Hope's leading position to Guang Zhen when he needed to step out. Guang Zhen was indispensable.

However, Guang Zhen was pissed because he wasn't given any superhuman ability; he felt understandably left out. While the rest of the Black Stars were outside having their own adventures, people could spot their acting captain stalking around the Hope with an upside-down smile plastered on his face.

He reluctantly accepted the report and started to read through it. That was another reason why Yao Yuan trusted Guang Zhen, he always wore his feelings on his sleeves.

“The number of people who survived Virus X was 102. Seven of them died on Planet Sahara, so that decreased the number of suspected Homo Evolutis to 95. 18 have been confirmed to exhibit signs of superhuman capabilities, the rest are still under observation.

“Below are the known Homo Evolutis types. We have the Diviner, like Lieutenant Zhang Heng, who can predict incoming danger seconds before it actually occurs. According to the experiments conducted, this

power is passive in the sense that it is automatically activated 90 percent of the times when danger is imminent...

“We have the Deceiver, like Mister Jay, who, according to field reports, can influence a foreign party’s thought processes through psychological manipulation. This power is active. The trigger mechanism is unknown, but it appears not to be activated by danger...

“We have the Seeker, like Lieutenant Ying, who can

observe his surroundings in perfect details as if viewed through a microscope. It greatly improves marksmanship. This power is active. Trigger mechanism is pressure from danger...

We have the Whisperer, like Miss Bo Li and Mister Ivan, who occasionally receive mysterious whispers when contemplating important questions or scientific conundrums. The whispers inspire breakthroughs. Active or passive power undetermined. Trigger mechanism unknown...

“We have the All-rounder, like
Major Yao Yuan...”

Chapter 49: The Daily Scoop (3)

Qi Xiao Niao, Lin Qiu Qiu, and Wang Dan Dan were sitting in their tent, chatting each other up.

The three guys were all students from Harbin Polytechnic University. Other than being each other's course mates, their families were also each other's neighbors. A brotherly bond was cemented through their years growing up together.

The story of impending apocalypse broke when they were still in university. Cancellation of classes aside, life in the university had remained for the most part unaffected. It was only after the university's access to the internet was cut off that people started to panic. Students were asked to head back to their hometowns.

The trio intended to follow the mass evacuation back home, but horror stories of riots and rebel armies had persuaded them to spend one extra week around

the campus for better preparation. Their cautiousness was a lifesaver because almost eighty percent of the people who blindly left campus never made it back home.

It took them three months to reach their hometown, and along the way they came across many of their friends' dead bodies. It was a harrowing experience. To make matters worse, when they finally arrived at their destination, they found their family homes in shambles and their families long gone. Their biggest fear had come true.

With each other's support, the three friends managed to recover from the initial trauma.

They matured from the experience. In the following days of anarchy, despite not having any weapons or fighting skills, they managed to round up a small group of survivors. With diligence and wit, they survived until rescue came in the form of the Black Star Unit...

A few months of anarchy had mellowed out the trio's youthful

impetuousness, but they were still adolescents in their heyday. The extended period of security on the Hope had returned them back from issues of survival to topics on video games and girls.

"Hey, bro, I just came back from the C4 district. There was indeed an unopened internet café. I snuck a look into it and saw rows of computers. Can't tell their actual specs, but the monitors and accessories were all high end stuff! Can't wait for it to finally open," shared Xiao Niao, in between glugs of water.

His friends were visibly excited by the news. It even brought Qiu Qiu to his feet, saying, "Let's go check it out!"

Dan Dan, however, remained seated and intoned listlessly, "You two can go ahead without me. They have promised us these entertainment amenities months ago. There's still no update, so why bother? They won't let us go in anyway... Also, weren't we supposed to answer the military's recruitment call this afternoon?"

Reminder of the recruitment slumped both Xiao Niao and Qiu Qiu back down to the floor.

"I don't understand why are the three of us being recruited. We majored in engineering, shouldn't we be assigned into the Workshop and not the army?" griped Qiu Qiu.

Dan Dan agreed, saying, "That is so true. In fact, we should be living in the Workshop right now and not here in the campgrounds. Like you said, why are we being enlisted? I do

not get it..."

Xiao Niao, who had been thoroughly silent since he sat down, suddenly added, "I wonder how many of us think that way?"

Dan Dan and Qiu Qiu turned to stare quizzically at their friend.

Xiao Niao elaborated, "You said we deserve a better accommodation because of our education. Do you think many people here share that thought?"

Qiu Qiu instantly replied, "I believe many of us think that way. For example, the teacher couple a few tents away. They consider themselves part of the scientific community and believe they deserve a residence in the Academy. Also, Lee, who said he was a sociologist, noticed that the Hope, especially in its lowest three levels, still has many areas that are warded off. If the authority would open these areas, all 120000 of us could have our own rooms and would no longer need to stay in these tents..."

Xiao Niao quickly warned his two friends, "Keep your distance from those people. These are very inflammatory remarks; the authority might not respond to them kindly."

Qiu Qiu and Dan Dan nodded in return, with Dan Dan adding, "Do you think we are that dense? It's the westerners that are acting on it, organizing these disastrous meetings. We are wise to stay far away from them."

"Indeed, they fail to see that we have a different way of handling

things. They prefer to go with ostentatious protests, but we prefer to bide our time. At the end of the day, we need the government, but the government also needs us. There are only 120000 of us left, and we are the foundation that's holding the Hope up. The government could only do so much without irreparably damaging its own survival. Can't these westerners see that things will eventually pan out? It is just a matter of time. In fact, I dare say, the government will soon roll out more residential areas, entertainment zones, and its own currency. These cries of dissention will only slow all that down," Qiu Qiu supplied.

Xiao Niao nodded affirmatively. "As long as we know where we stand, it's all good... Also, since you've mentioned the recruitment call, I'll share some of the information I've gathered over the past two days."

Without wasting any more time, he continued, "Hundreds of soldiers were lost on Planet Sahara. It's only logical that the military needs new recruits to replace these vacancies, but there was one detail that struck me as weird... Of the people who were being recruited, more than

twenty of them are women. I'm not saying that women can't be soldiers, but the fact that so many of them are being recruited while there is not a single woman in the current administration is a bit weird. Therefore, I decided to do some more digging. Can you two guess what I found?"

"What?" his two friends asked in unison.

"Like us, all of these women were victims of the mysterious fever!" exclaimed Xiao Niao.

Being reminded of that torturous fever blanched both of his friends' faces, but Dan Dan continued to ask, "What you're saying is that everyone who survived the fever is being recruited?"

"It's your choice to believe it or not, but ever since I received the recruitment call, my mind has been completely wrapped up over this mysterious fever. It was as if something was telling me that this fever was the key. And with that as the starting point, more clues started to

surface out of the woodwork. Now, based on my analysis and inference, I've come to a conclusion...

"I believe there is something unique about us, the people who survived this fever. Look at our Major, the Black Star Lieutenants, and that guy, Jay who many hail as a hero. Is it not weird that all these eminent people survived this fever? There must be something special about this group of people that the government knows but hasn't divulged."

"So, do you think that is why we're being recruited?"

Chapter 50: Homo Evolutis

Around three in the afternoon after the Hope's second warp, the military decided to have its first recruitment and enlistment call.

Candidates who were recruited in advance included veterans, field doctors, and, of course, those that survived Virus X.

The aim was to gather around 500 new recruits as well as 2,500

new law enforcers. This was to prop up the Hope's own police force so that its military and civil affairs could be properly divided.

◦

It was now two in the afternoon. About 400 hopefuls had congregated around the stairway between the Hope's third and fourth floors. More impressively, this number was still climbing.

However, eighty percent of the people were there only to try out for the police officer vacancies. The misadventure on Planet Sahara deterred most from applying for a military role. They had learnt of the cosmos' cruel reality. To put it frankly, most of them wanted the privileges of being a soldier but none of the dangers that came with it. The role of a police officer offered exactly that. Naturally, the level of privilege will be stages lower than that of an actual soldier, but after three months on the job, the Hope promised an upgrade from a tent to a simple residence. Other than that, the police would only be on patrol details, and their

lives would not be at risk.

This meant that only about 800 people applied for a military role. They averaged at age thirty and each exuded an air of sturdiness and reliability.

As mentioned above, the privileges accorded to military men were much greater than that given to the policemen. Their residences were much more extravagant in the sense that they were larger and came with better amenities and services. Their families were

also given better treatment.

Furthermore, many heard through the grapevine that after the Hope introduces its currency, each soldier will be receiving monthly wages that could be used to trade for food and luxury items like cigarettes.

At three pm sharp, ten army captains appeared at the designated location. After setting up a set of rudimentary sign-in locales, the attendees were asked to organize into fifteen lines to expedite the

registration process. Nine were for police force applications and the rest for military.

Order prevailed; there were no line-cuttings nor petty grievances.

Among the burly men who were queuing up for military application appeared an eighteen-year-old Asian girl. With cheeks that creased into dimples when she smiled, the lithe, sweet girl-next-door stood out like a sore thumb amongst the mass of muscles.

Folding her arms, she was impatiently tapping her feet as she griped to the young man behind her, “Ren Tao, didn’t I tell you that we should come earlier? You see, we are so far behind now! It will take hours for us to reach the registration. If this makes us late for dinner, I am going to whip you up real good!”

“Chou Yue, would you please calm down... Actually, we don’t even need to line up...” The teen yawned before he finished his sentence. With a perpetually

disheveled look, the teen gave the impression that his mind was always elsewhere.

Chou Yue leered discontentedly at the teen, chiding, “Don’t need to line up? Don’t tell me you intent to jump the queue? Ren Tao, I’m telling you now: if you really do such a despicable thing, I’m going to personally ensure that your life becomes hell!”

“...no, what I meant is that since there are so many people lining up, if we are going to miss

dinner, so would the rest of these people,” said Ren Tao with another yawn.

Chou Yue stared daggers at him, adding acidly, “Why do you think we’re so far back here in the first place, you little numbskull... Who was it that I found up in the air vent when I specifically said not to wander off? How did you get up there, anyway? That vent entrance was lower than the others but it was still five meters off the ground!”

Chou Yue’s acerbic tone finally

managed to pull Ren Tao's frayed senses back together. He laughed awkwardly as he said, "Err... I forgot."

Needless to say, his reply didn't help with Chou Yue's rising temper. After a long breathing exercise, Chou Yue finally said, "Fine. Just stand still now! I'll deal with you later when we're out of public eye!"

The pair's interaction had inadvertently attracted many interested stares.

They were already confused about the girl's presence in line with them, but at least she had a commanding presence about her. Comparatively, the boy was way too skinny and was at least half a head smaller than the girl. It was hard to imagine that he had any real business being there. They would fit more in the line for a pop star concert than the line for army recruitment.

Nevertheless, they were too busy with their own preparations to worry about this young couple. It was not their job to weed out the unqualified.

One hour later, the girl finally reached the registration table. The Chinese soldier who manned the table took a look at Chou Yue and asked patronizingly, "Young lady, this is the line for military registration. Are you sure you haven't gotten the lines mixed up? The line for police recruitment is on your left."

Chou Yue retrieved from her pocket a letter and shoved it into the soldier's face, saying haughtily, "Don't you think I know that? It's you people that

wanted me here! I'm not a veteran and I don't have any medical nor military training, so I myself wonder why I'm here! If you don't want us here, why call for the both of us?"

The pair of military officials stole a glance at one another, obviously taken aback by Chou Yue's confrontational reaction. The Asian soldier carefully took the letter from Chou Yue. Stamped with a red seal, the letter wrote about requesting the recipient, Ren Chou Yue, to be present at the recruitment spot at three in the afternoon because she had been selected to

join the army.

“An early recruitment call? This means you’re one of the Homo Evolutis?” The man looked askance at Chou Yue.

“Homo Evolutis? What’s that? Do you mean the Gen-i [1]? Kids nowadays that wanders about with nose rings and neon hair? Those are the people the army is recruiting? If that’s true, I’m not sure I want your protection,” fired Chou Yue.

“No, no, that’s not what it means.” The man laughed awkwardly as he waved them away. “In any case, your recruitment has already been confirmed. Please find the officer stationed by the staircase, he’ll lead you to the fourth floor to complete the registration.” Then he handed the letter politely back to Chou Yue.

Making sure the soldier was still within earshot, Chou Yue muttered angrily, “So there was indeed no need for us to line up. Why didn’t the officials inform us of that earlier? The lazy bums! In any case, Ren Tao,

you're right again! ...Ren Tao?"

Chou Yue turned around and instead of Ren Tao, an African man was standing behind her. When he realized Chou Yue was staring blankly at him, he smiled kindly at her, revealing a line of sparkling teeth.

Ren Tao had disappeared again...

Chou Yue was trying hard to keep her temper from boiling over as she went in search for

Ren Tao. Just as she was going to reach her anger limit, a commotion sounded from a corner of the room. As she rushed towards it, she saw a few officers gathered below a monitor, yelling at it.

On top of the monitor sat a young man, obviously swinging his feet even though he was about seven meters off the ground...

Ten minutes and the aid of a ladder later, the officers managed to get Ren Tao down

from his precarious spot. Before his feet even touched solid ground, Chou Yue gathered all her might as she delivered a punch to his face, giving him a black eye.

After the crowd dispersed, Chou Yue and Ren Tao, alongside other members who had red-sealed letters, were led by a senior officer up to the fourth floor.

On the way, Chou Yue grabbed hold of Tao Ren and whispered, "How did you know we didn't

need to line up? I saw these ten people with us also standing in line before.”

Lazily rubbing his eyes, Ren Tao mumbled, “It’s simple deduction, really. Also, for some reason, when I thought of this, my surroundings became suspiciously silent with more clues starting to bubble up... Chou Yue, I’m afraid we aren’t getting recruited to become normal soldiers.”

Ren Tao eyed the ten people around them and whispered to

Chou Yue, “I’m not sure where we will end up, but I’m certain we’re here because we were all survivors of that mysterious fever... Chou Yue, if anything happens to us, please try not to let that temper of yours flare up and makes things worse...

“I can see two drastically different outcomes: either we become filthy rich or we will have an ending that’s worse than death... I fear we’ll end up as the authority’s test subjects...”

“If it comes to that, don’t you

worry; I'll be the first to put you down. I promise you, it won't hurt even a bit..."

Aka Generation-i. The iPhone, iPad generation.

Chapter 51: An Explosion

The more she thought about it, the more concerned Chou Yue became about what Ren Tao had said.

In spite of his unassuming appearance, Ren Tao had been a reliable big brother to her. After both of their parents passed away, he has been the rock she relied on. She knew that he was always on the lookout for their best interest and she was greatly comforted by that.

Of course, she would not in a million years admit any of that openly.

So, despite her mortification, she kept a cavalier appearance as she ruffled her brother's hair, whispering, "Why do you say that? Do you think we're heading into danger?"

"I suppose that depends on these three factors..." Ren Tao whispered in return. "First, our value; second, our possible liability; and third, the

authority's conscience... I'm banking on the third since the Hope is still quite small and the major has shown himself to be a trustworthy leader. At least I believe he won't consciously bring us harm..."

"...That's optimistic of you... But, Ren Tao... Tell me, if they do decide to harm me, what would you do?" Chou Yue asked in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"I suppose I could use your dead body to inspire a riot... Use it as

evidence to expose the government's sinister nature. Your body could be the foundation of a successful rebellion..." teased Ren Tao.

With a swift punch, Chou Yue added another black eye to Ren Tao's face to complete the symmetry.

The pair's banter helped lessen the anxiety as they were led to their uncertain future. But even that quieted down when they arrived before a lab where ten plus people, twenty soldiers, and

ten black-star close guards stood waiting.

The solemn atmosphere had Chou Yue frozen, and the hand that held on to Ren Tao started shaking. In contrast, Ren Tao's expression remained unchanged while his alert eyes scanned their surroundings.

Right then, a European man came out of the lab. Swearing under his breath, he kept rubbing his neck. A minute later, an Asian teen walked out of the lab. Spotting the grumpy

European, he started chatting with him. Soon, they both began laughing.

Beside Chou Yue, Ren Tao gave a breath of relief and whispered, "It seems like we have nothing to worry about. Try to memorize everything that happens in there so that later we can compare our notes."

Chou Yue felt greatly reassured by her brother's words, but instead of letting that show, she chose to gloat, "Don't worry about me; I could memorize the

details just fine, but... literal numbskull, could you?"

"Err... I'll try..."

The two men who came out of the lab were known figures around the Hope. The European was Jay, who recently made a name for himself as the Hope's hero, and the Asian was the Black Star Unit's youngest member, Zhang Heng.

Having saved humanity from the treacherous Planet Sahara,

the duo, plus their major, were fresh conversation topics on the Hope.

(It looks like survivors of fever were afforded a special importance. This means that we are needed, and thus won't be harmed. Now I just have to figure what this special importance is...)

Ren Tao thought to himself. When he came to, he was perplexed to find himself sitting in an air vent entrance...

"Ren Tao, where are you? I swear to God if I find you in an air vent again..."

On the other end of the floor, Jay and Zhang Heng were walking towards the fifth floor. "Why the long face? Did you fail today's test again?" asked Zhang Heng concernedly.

Still rubbing his neck, Jay roared, "Do you know what those crazy scientists did today? They tossed me into a giant, flushing toilet and spun me around! Do they seriously think

that could help understand the superhuman state in any way? They must have lost their minds!"

"That's probably not a toilet but a centrifuge..." offered Zhang Heng kindly. "Although, who am I to complain? My power is passive, so no weird trigger mechanism experiments for me. However, more tests await you, Ying, and all those new recruits. After all, according to the scientists, these powers still possess way too many unknowns. It might be incredibly dangerous if overused or misused."

"What do they know? You were there yesterday when Yao Yuan demonstrated a rudimentary grasp of his power. It completely debunked their theory that the trigger mechanism includes the presence of danger. I say these scientists are all frauds, and believe me, because it takes one to know one!" said Jay snidely.

Zhang Heng couldn't help but laugh at Jay's self-deprecating humor. After their adventure on Planet Sahara, the two men had become close friends. It also helped that Jay was promoted to

join the Barracks after his glorious return from Planet Sahara. He was automatically scripted into the Hope's army and although without a proper title, was given treatment equivalent to that of a lieutenant.

However, there was one thing that had dampened his meteoric rise in the administrative ladder. It was Feng Xiao Chen. When an excited Jay went to invite her to share the spare room in his residence, she flat out refused to talk to him. Gone was the fiery girl with an oftentimes suffocating behavior.

"...liar, I don't ever want to see your face again."

That single sentence was all Xiao Chen would grant him. Later that night, Jay went through a whole month's worth of alcohol ration. The next day, suffering from a massive hang over, he was gloomy and confrontational.

Zhang Heng was at a loss for words on how to comfort his friend, so he skipped tentatively around the taboo subject as they

walked towards the fifth floor Barracks. Suddenly, Jay asked, "You lucky dog though, you have a pick of three gorgeous ladies. Tell me, which one is your choice?"

"Three ladies?" Zhang Heng echoed before laughing awkwardly as he pieced together his answer. "Do you mean Mao Miao, Ning Xue, and Bo Li? What choice do I have? We're good friends who were there for each other, there is no choosing involved... Furthermore, they know of my good-for-nothing past, so if asked, I don't think they would choose me."

"Don't sell yourself short! Based on my years of experience being a professional conman, I can confidently say that Mao Miao and Ning Xue are into you. Though that girl, Bo Li, is a mystery. Perverse sexual fantasies aside, if you could use a little charm, I'm sure they would be willing to listen to what you have in mind..." Jay chuckled mischievously.

Suddenly, they heard a scream.
"Help! Mayday! Mayday!"

Before anyone could make sense of what was happening, a violent tremor shook the Hope. As it settled, a sharp siren rang through the ship, throwing all 120000 people into panic.

Ten seconds ago...

In a sealed lab somewhere around the Academy, a moderately-sized team of scientists was busy at work. They were tasked with inducing a reversal in Planet Sahara's plant crystallization process. The plan was to use the plant to

undo the energy crystal Yao Yuan had brought back to its original energy form to refill the Hope's drying reserves.

After his identification as one of the Whisperers, Ivan's station in the Academy had taken an impressive hike. Granted it was not as grand as other committee leaders, at least now he had the power to lead his own unit. And his group was already showing promising progress. Using a chemical potion he developed, his group had managed to goad the plant to break down the crystal. The next step was to encourage it to release its

absorbed energy.

Ivan's group stood around one of their first successes, a plant growth the size of a grown man's palm that had been induced to absorb 0.5 cubic millimeters of crystal. Streaks of electricity could be seen surging through the plant's surface, a sign of impending success.

Beside Ivan, a scientist from another unit said, "Professor Ivan, congratulations on the success with your chemical potion. Would you care to share

its formula with the rest of the room?"

Ivan nodded before shaking his head. "I won't call this a success. But in any case, the formula is quite complicated. It utilizes the acidic bodily fluid of the creatures from Planet Sahara. Since they were able to keep the plant spores active to supply the host with energy while subjugating the spores' growth, I had a feeling maybe they could be used to our advantage..."

Unexpectedly, the plant started

to glow. Within a few seconds, its glow had gotten so blinding that people in the room had to shield their eyes. Some of the senior scientists who instinctively knew something was wrong yelled for everyone to get back from the growth. Before their advice could be heeded, the plant blew up in a plasmatic explosion, melting half of the lab. Residual static could be seen coursing through the room...

While everyone else scurried for cover, Ivan leaped at a computer next to him. Cradling the machine as he fell, he knew

he had no choice but to shield
the computer with his body,
because a voice in his head kept
telling him...

Save the chemical formula!

Because it works!

Chapter 52: Risks and Rewards!

The explosion shook the Hope down to its core. Of the 120000 people onboard, there was none that didn't feel the reverberating tremor. In fact, more than a handful had sensed it before it actually occurred.

Among them was Yao Yuan, who was one of first respondents. Accompanying him were Zhang Heng, Jay, and a platoon of soldiers who were stationed near the lab.

The plasmatic explosion evaporated more than half of the lab. The scientist who was standing closest to the exit suffered from severe first degree burns, and naturally, the remaining people who were much closer to the origin of the blast weren't any better off.

Soon after the blast, the rest of the military began arriving in droves. Using a factory-grade water hose, they started putting out the fire. Yao Yuan stood in despair at the sideline as the vapors rose up like hellish

mists...

They had lost almost one hundred scientists on Planet Sahara, and now they had to account for about fifty more?! It was pure devastation because when they left Earth, the Academy totaled at barely a thousand! When hope at the Academy dimmed, so did humanity's chance at survival!

"Who was in the lab? Give me a list quick!" ordered Yao Yuan grimly to the stunned scientists beside him. They were academic

committee leaders with the same amount of power and job-scope as Alan and Silewei.

They were still too dumbstruck to answer until a chemist offered, "If I'm not mistaken, this lab was led by Ivan's group... They were conducting experiments to induce the reverse crystallization process through biochemical methods."

This biochemical method was itself a source of contention within the Academy. Many argued that the energy

extraction process should be based on physics principles because they were dealing with matters of energy and force.

The opposite camp, the one which Ivan was in, retorted that even if they wanted to, their technology couldn't afford a purely physics-based approach. Plus, they were dealing with alien plant. It could only be beneficial to include perspectives from the fields of biology, chemistry, and genetics. And this explosion announced that Ivan's group had indeed happened upon a breakthrough.

"Ivan?" Yao Yuan said as his expression grew somber.

Not only did Yao Yuan remember Ivan, he valued this up and coming scientist. Ivan showed brilliant promise when he offered his groundbreaking and lifesaving proposal on Planet Sahara. Furthermore, he was one of the two known Whisperers.

The Whisperer was one of the known Homo Evolutis type. With the exception of the

Deceiver, they were incredibly unique in the sense that they were different from other powers which were only useful in battles. Instead, they inspired progress and revelation, valuable assets in both times of peace and war.

This was why Yao Yuan regarded both Ivan and Bo Li, the pair of known Whisperers, highly. Their possible achievements could rival that of Newton and Einstein. In other words, they were crucial to the Hope's advancement and its survival.

But now the hopes he had placed on Ivan had literally gone up in smokes...

"Damn! Doesn't Ivan know how to follow safety protocols?" Yao Yuan cursed. "How could there even be an explosion in the first place? Wasn't it the Academy who reported that the energy crystal was stable?"

A physicist replied timidly, "Yes, Major, that is true. Even though its chemical structure remains unknown, based on a

multitude of tests, its stability is well documented. For example, when the crystal was subjected to extreme pressure, it was reduced powder but didn't explode. That is why shaving of the crystal could be done without fear of an explosive reaction... So, logically speaking, it is not that Professor Ivan didn't follow protocol, but he had indeed engineered a way to make the plant reverse its crystallization process."

Yao Yuan wanted to yell at the scientists, but he knew that they weren't to be blamed, so he could only resort to stomaching

his frustration as he planned his next course of action. Suddenly, shouts could be heard from the team who was sent into the lab to do a perimeter check.

Without hesitation, Yao Yuan grabbed hold of a nearby water bucket and doused himself. Then he charged bravely into the lab, cutting through a solid wall of heat wave. Inside, he was shocked to find a few figures with blistering and cracked skin moaning on the floor.

Cursory inspection told Yao

Yuan that the lab had an embedded fire alarm system. It must have been triggered during the explosion and its outer covering most likely had shielded it from severe damage. In fact, Yao Yuan could still see weak mists of water spraying out of its many spigots.

The lucky few were standing right under these spigots when the explosion occurred. However, even though they were lucky enough to have survived the explosion, whether they could live another day was altogether a different issue.

Based on their moans, Yao Yuan started locating these survivors. There were in total five of them, and one of them was Ivan, who was found collapsed atop a computer.

Hanging on to his life via a slim thread, he was flittering in and out of consciousness. Yao Yuan could even hear his breath weakening.

As soon as he saw him, Yao Yuan yelled, "Get the doctors in here! There are survivors!"

Quick!"

And chaos ensued...

It was only on the following night that the situation on the Hope began to settle.

Of the five who survived the explosion, two died in surgery while the other three remained in coma. They were kept under 24-hour watch in ICU for they were still not out of danger zone.

Furthermore, the injuries and deaths were not the only mishaps that followed the explosion. A maintenance crew found out that the blast had caused a short circuit in the Hope's anti-gravitational system. With the lab as its center, a zero-gravity area started to spread.

Regarding this, Yao Yuan had merely ordered the area to be cordoned off. The gravity of the situation hadn't registered on him.

The next morning, a few

flustered physicists rushed to meet Yao Yuan. Only then did he understand that the zero-gravity area could seriously compromise the Hope's structural integrity.

"Major, you have to understand that there is a tension that exists between a spaceship's inner and outer walls. Pressure on the inner walls comes from the ship's load, while the outer one comes from the pull between the ship and other intergalactic entities. To ensure the ship is safe, these two forces must be balanced at all times. There is a reason why the Hope is built in a cone shape. It is the only shape

where our current technology can accurately calculate strategic locations where anti-gravitational units can be placed! The correct placement completely neutralizes the conflicting tension. Without these exact calculations, cracks would form at its weak spots and the spaceship would fold unto itself thanks to the imbalance in applied pressure!

"As I've mentioned, the cone-shaped spaceship is the easiest to build because these pressure points could be easily determined. Following that is the flattened shape, the one

reflected in popular culture. Then is the spherical, and each of these changes in shape means a quadrupling in manufacturing difficulty! Of course, when one's technology is advanced enough, these shapes would matter no more, but we humans have not gotten that far.

"That is why, Major, this ship took twenty years to make. It is not the assembling that was time-consuming but the math behind it!

"So, this new zero-gravity area

creates for the Hope the
aforementioned weak point! Its
effect won't be obvious while
we're idling in space, but when
our surrounding pressure
increases like it does during
warp, nearing a star, or even
turning, that will be the point
where the Hope starts to fall
apart!"

Chapter 53: Energy... Energy!

After Yao Yuan stepped down from his position as the leader of the Black Star Unit, he became a talent scout. With his broad family connections and relations forged during his military days, the trade came to him like fish to the water.

And thanks that brief stint, Yao Yuan developed a sharp eye for talent.

That was why when multiple leading scientists approached him brandishing a similar concern, he knew their appeal had to be heard... and that meant the Hope's short-circuited anti-gravitational system had to be fixed in no time!

“Major, you want us to build an anti-gravitational unit?” queried the flustered scientists.

Yao Yuan, who saw no problem in his proposition, explained, “Like what you said, the anti-gravitational unit for that area is

broken. Couldn't the Academy build another unit to replace it? Just follow the schematic that's available in the Hope's central mainframe."

The scientists shared a look among themselves, and one of them replied, "I mean no disrespect, Major... But it's not as simple as that. Did you forget the fact that we're running low on energy?"

Yao Yuan continued to stare at the group of scientists confusedly.

“Yes, we could follow the schematic to build another anti-gravitational unit, but where would we get the special grade metal needed to assemble it? There is indeed a store of the metal’s raw ingredients, but to mold them into metal ingots, we need access to the forge. Since the Hope’s an enclosed area, we have to rely on electro-thermal methods to power the forge. We simply don’t have enough energy to spare to do that at the moment.

“Even if we could melt the

ingredients into ingots, we would still need another huge reserve of energy to power the machines that are needed to cut and mold the ingots into appropriate shapes and sizes.”

Comprehension finally dawned on Yao Yuan. While scratching his chin in thought, he asked, “According to the Academy’s professional opinion, how much energy does it require to finish building this unit?”

“About five days’ worth of energy used in powering the

Hope,” the scientist answered as he handed Yao Yuan a set of data. Flipping through it, Yao Yuan’s expression dimmed.

According to the data, the existing unit had three sections that were broken beyond repair, while seven other sections suffered from minor malfunctions. However, the Hope’s low reserve of energy could support neither repairs nor rebuilding...

“... I see, so the Academy’s suggestion is to remove the

hovercrafts' anti-gravitational system and appropriate those to replace the ones currently broken on the Hope?" asked Yao Yuan as he closed the data report.

To ensure a light load, the Hope carried only twenty hovercrafts and three shuttles when they escaped from Earth. They couldn't bring along any tanks or aircrafts.

At the moment, they only had one damaged shuttle and nineteen hovercrafts left.

Furthermore, these remaining ones were valuable assets to the Hope's military; they would be crucial in the Hope's future planet exploration. Yao Yuan understood then why these scientists had come directly to him. He was the only person with enough power to validate their request to impair ten hovercrafts.

“Fine, I’ll give the Academy permission to repurpose ten hovercrafts. However, in return, I request that the repairs of the Hope’s anti-gravitational system be completed expediently... Also, are there any updates

regarding Professor Ivan's experiments? What caused the explosion?"

Silewei shuffled to the front of the group, explicating, "There was an assistant who survived the blast with only minor burns. With his assistance, we were able to piece together Professor Ivan's research framework. Building off of his theory of natural biological weakness, he believes the answer to producing a reverse crystallization process could be found in the environment surrounding the alien plant. With that in mind, he turned to the plants' alien

hosts. With their acidic fluid, these animals can allay the spores' growth while ensuring the plants continue to provide them with energy. That, Ivan feels, is a form of reverse crystallization because the plants are, in a way, prompted by their hosts into releasing their processed energy. Therefore, using these acids, Ivan had created a unique chemical potion. The formula is known only by Ivan, but he is currently..." Silewei broke off with a shake of his head.

"Indisposed... But wait! Couldn't the Academy retrieve

the formula from Ivan's computer? Look through it to determine what caused the explosion," continued Yao Yuan.

"We already know what caused the explosion, Major," said an ancient-looking man. With a balding head and aquiline nose, the man carried himself with much solemnity.

Yao Yuan instantly recognized the man as the French senior physicist, Aleson. An expert in superconductor research, Professor Aleson was a famed

figure within the physics world and was once honored with a Nobel nomination. When news of the neutron star catastrophe erupted within the world governments, the States tried contacting him, but spurned by his Nobel Prize loss to a US scientist, he refused to align himself with them. Then, he was invited by Yao Yuan to join the Hope.

“The young, in their hubris and impetus, are always eager to skirt around safety protocols. He should have known about the risks involved in experimenting with chemical potions. These

young generations never listen..." said Aleson chillingly.

Smiling politely, Yao Yuan asked, "Then, Professor Aleson, could you tell us what was the cause for this explosion?"

"What else could it be?" snorted the disgruntled professor. "They didn't create a proper channel for the energy to release itself, so when it reached its limit, the collected energy could only push outward in an explosion... Let me put it another way: for a normal

crystallization process, the energy collected is stored in the crystal, and this creates a stable energy circuit. But for its reverse? Energy is released outwards! Without a proper vessel to collect the released energy, it will only collect on the plant's surface! They've basically made a ticking time bomb! And that, Major, is why there was an explosion!"

Aleson continued to rile himself up as he went through his explanation. By the end, he was shaking with fury.

“If that’s the case, it would fall on Professor Aleson’s shoulders to form a special group to formulate and create a stable outer energy circuit. After that, Ivan’s experiment can be repeated and hopefully it’ll be successful this time around. I hope I don’t need to remind everyone to follow the safety protocols; we can’t risk another explosion.”

Yao Yuan’s proposal, however, was greeted by resigned laughs. From the corner of his eye, Yao Yuan saw Aleson shaking his head. He was stumped by the scientists’ reaction. Did he say

something wrong?

Silewei was the first to reply. “Major, I understand your eagerness to unlock the energy crystal, since it represents survival for the Hope, but... to create a circuit or a vessel that could withstand huge amounts of energy and not explode? That needs to be specially built, which brings us back to the issue of unavailability of the forge.

“Furthermore, like you said, we couldn’t risk another explosion on the Hope, so the logical

solution would be to conduct the experiment on the shuttle outside of the Hope. Of course, this means fixing the shuttle first, and naturally that requires another reserve of energy...

“Nevertheless, all of this is still doable if we pool all our resources on this one experiment. The other option is to sit idly and wait for death, so there’s really not much of a choice. However, there remains one final problem standing in the way...

“The computer with Ivan’s formula was melted in the explosion and it is still unknown whether the data within is salvageable. Ivan, on the other hand, is still in coma...

“We have no guaranteed way of getting the potion formula!!”

Chapter 54: To Die For

Sitting at the family dinner table, Silewei took in his wife, son, daughter-in-law, and granddaughter that sat around him. He felt absolutely content enveloped within their merry chatters.

It was the ninth day after the Hope's second space-warp. The reparation process for the Hope's anti-gravitational system was well under way. According to the designated schedule, they would be fixing the shuttle later that night. At the same time, a

rudimentary lab would be set up within it so that it could be used to plan and create the new energy circuit.

Simultaneously, the Workshop was working day and night trying to retrieve the information on Ivan's computer. The computer wasn't as damaged as they previously thought, and the Workshop had been making headway with their data retrieval programs. According to their prediction, the complete set of data could be restored in a few hours' time.

And the Hope had four days worth of energy left...

However, practically speaking, the Hope's energy could only last for one more day, because missions like deploying the shuttle and forging the materials consumed massive amounts of energy. As the physics academic committee leader, Silewei was one of the select few who knew about the Hope's dire situation.

Silewei sat quietly, carving the steak on his plate. It was one of the few luxuries he occasionally

allowed himself, but today he didn't have the appetite to enjoy it. He had spent his one month's worth of luxury items to assemble the feast before him. There were steaks, red wines, cigars, caviar, lobster, and even fresh fruits and vegetables harvested from the biomes.

Putting down his fork, he turned to look at his family, who were happily enjoying their meals. He smiled when his young granddaughter winked at him while sipping on her juice box.

His wife softly nudged him, asking with a hint of concern in her voice, "Why the splurge, honey? These must have cost quite a bit."

Obviously curious as well, his son, daughter-in-law, and their ten-year-old daughter all turned to look expectantly at him.

Silewei took a sip of the red wine and smiled. "it's nothing important. I thought of having a little family feast to celebrate a work-related breakthrough. Furthermore, the Hope is going

to roll out its currency system soon, so as the resident professor, I'm sure I will be given my fair share of salary. So don't worry."

There was an audible collective sigh of relief before his family moved on to lighter topics.

Silewei knew why they were concerned and he wished to spare them the worry.

Before setting foot on the Hope, even though it wasn't as horrible

as what Alan and his family experienced, they too had suffered during the riots. They were essentially confined within their own home. Wary of venturing out in search of food, they had spent a long stretch of time in bouts of starvation. It was a difficult times for his family, but it must have been harrowing for his ten-year-old granddaughter.

After they were saved by the Hope, they had to worry about mistreatment by a predominantly Chinese government or that it would have an authoritarian regime.

To their pleasant surprise, they were given a spacious residence in the Academy, with their own private washroom, bedrooms, and kitchen. Other than that, Silewei was given a monthly quota for luxury items. Even when compared to other scientists, the Hope treated them incredibly well.

"Did I mention I ran into Mrs. Thompson today? She was asking a quartermaster for baby powder... The poor woman lost her husband when they're both so young, and she has to single handedly raise a daughter now. However, I feel the government

has handled her situation well; they didn't cut her from her husband's military welfare, as a matter of fact, I believe they might have increased it. I heard her asking for her monthly quota of five high-quality milk powder cans. That's almost as many as we get," Silewei's daughter-in-law said jokingly.

"It is going to be hard for her as a single mom. Actually, our family doesn't even need seven cans of milk powder. Only little Wae takes them and she can barely finish four tins in one month... Why don't we give the extra to Mrs. Thompson?" asked

Silewei's wife.

"No! They are my stuff! You can't take them away from me! Mommy, I'll drink three cups of milk instead of one every day starting today!" harrumphed little Wae.

Then, the little girl sulkily buried herself in her mother's arms. It took much goading and a surrender of her grandpa's share of lobster for the girl start smiling again. With his cherished granddaughter snuggling in his lap chewing

part of his dinner, Silewei could feel his worry fluttering away.

(It is moments like these... Simple moments of domestic joy... These are things that are worth defending and worth dying for!)

Then, Silewei had a flashback to the morning when the fateful meeting was held.

"I can't stress the importance of this experiment enough! It is basically tied to the survival of

120000 people. However, to be clear, it is also incredibly dangerous. There is a high chance that the people who undertake this experiment will not survive... This experiment will be taking place on the shuttle thousands of meters away from the Hope, so if there is a mishap, there will be nothing that can be done!"

Gathered in the room were twenty plus scientists. Like Alan, Silewei, and Aleson, they were all leaders of different academic committees.

The person who spoke was Aleson. Famous for his short temper and eccentricity, he was a pariah even within the scientific community. With a feverish gleam in his eyes, he growled, "I don't care who else is coming, but I will be joining this experiment!"

The other scientists looked strangely at him. An Asian scientist asked, "Professor Aleson... Are you sure? You have a family on the Hope. People who are single like us can go; we have nothing to lose, but you have to think..."

"It is because my family is on the Hope that I must go! One, I dare say that no one is more knowledgeable than me on the subject of energy circuit, for that's my specialization! Since we're going to need the best possible chance, you can't spare the best in this field!

"Secondly... It is because my family is on the Hope that I have to go... To be frank, I don't see what is so impressive about this steel box in space, there's no blue sky and no brown earth. Simple things like these are

views that my grandkids will never see... But it is undeniable that they are happy! And hope is the thing that is keeping their happiness alive! No one can tell what will happen next in space... We could warp into a black hole and die, but we could also find a brand new home planet. But to ensure these possibilities are open, one needs hope!

"And it is with this burning hope in our hearts that my family was about to survive through the riots and finally find solace on this ship! Hope has transformed our possibility of survival into reality!

"And I would gladly lay down my life for this hope!"

Aleson took down his glasses and tiredly rubbed his eyes, then he continued, "There are still four spots to be filled" one biologist, one chemist, one physicist, and one lab assistant. Everyone, like what I've said, we need the best people to give ourselves the best possible fighting chance. That's everything I have to say, and I will meet the rest of the team by the shuttle tomorrow afternoon."

Silewei's attention blinked back to the present. He kissed his granddaughter on her head and whispered, "Little Wae's birthday is coming up in two months... Granddaddy promises to bring you the best present."

"Really? Thank you, granddaddy!" Wae excitedly hopped off Silewei's lap. Tugging at his sleeves, she kept asking him to give her hints about the present.

Silewei merely smiled, but his

wife noticed that that smile hid a determination that was previously absent.

(Yes, it is hopes like these that are worth dying for!)

Silewei rose up early the next morning. When he reached the shuttle hangar, Aleson was already standing there, surrounded by ten plus scientists...

Chapter 55: Final Second

The final selected five were French superconductor expert, Aleson; German physicist, Silewei; Chinese biologist, Yuan Pin; Italian chemist, Hannah; and the lab assistant, Bo Li. Bo Li was picked because her ability as a Whisperer might prove useful in unexpected ways.

The five, were indeed as Aleson predicted: the best the Hope could offer in their respective fields. It was truly an all-in bet. If they were to fail, Yao Yuan

grimly said it would be easier to commit suicide than wait passively for death to come.

As the team of five boarded the shuttle with a newly concocted chemical potion, the Black Star Unit with the accompaniment of Jay stood silently by the hangar wall waiting for it to lift off.

"Let's go. Instead of standing here and worrying, the time will be better spent planning our next move."

Yao Yuan was the first to go back into the Hope. The rest of the group glanced at one another and fell in behind Yao Yuan. Their hearts were heavy with Yao Yuan's parting words... our next move.

But if the experiment were to fail, there would be no next move...

The team of five sat obediently in their seats, the atmosphere too solemn for any words to be exchanged. Suddenly, to everyone's horror, Aleson

removed his helmet and stripped out of his spacesuit. Ignoring everybody's questioning gaze, he retrieved from his case an MP5 player and started playing it. Silence in the shuttle was soon replaced by the harmonious melody of a classical orchestra.

"Professor Aleson, what are you... the spacesuit..." Hannah gasped.

Aleson smiled. "What difference would it make? If the experiment fails, the result is still death. If we're saved due to

the suit's protection, it's just going to elongate the pain towards death. Instead of stubbornly hanging on to life, I'd prefer to be put out of my misery instantly."

That silenced all future argument. After that, Bo Li was the next to remove her spacesuit, followed by Yuan Pin and Silewei. Hannah hesitated before finally, with a long sigh, removing hers.

The team continued to sit quietly, listening to the classical

music, each immersed in their thoughts. A few minutes later, the shuttle's broadcast started a countdown. The team strapped in their seat belts, preparing to lift off. As the countdown dropped to zero, the shuttle was shot out into space. In almost an instant, they were thousands of meters away from the Hope.

Communication between the shuttle and the Hope was lost due to the interference of electrical charges in the surrounding nebula. The Hope's scanning technology wasn't advanced enough to pierce through the nebula's heavy

static cloud. With the exception of a bluish glow that was visible to the naked eye, the Hope couldn't see anything beyond itself.

Fidgeting with the communicator, Bo Li shook her head. "It is as everyone predicted: all forms of communications have been cut off. The multi-frequency communicator is still usable though, but without a hacker among us, it is practically useless."

Aleson chuckled in reply. "That's fine too. We're conducting an experiment, not a concert, so the Hope doesn't need a live feed. They only need the results, and it is our responsibility to hand them one..." Sitting up, he placed his MP5 player on a nearby table and started assembling the necessary equipment.

Then, Hannah asked, "Professor Aleson, if you don't mind me asking, is this score... the famed Final Second?"

Surprised, Aleson turned to meet Hannah's curious gaze. His surprise melted into a smile. "Indeed you are correct.

"I remember the year was 2012 and the Mayan end-of-the-world prophecy was at its feverish height. Lots of doomsday cults started surfacing, and one of them did something that earned international infamy. In one of United States' rural towns, a cult started a satanic ritual. Instead of appealing to God, in their twisted logic, they decided to sell their souls to the demons in the hopes that hell would preserve them from the Rapture.

So they started going around killing babies and children as sacrifices to the Devil...

"One day, they captured a school. A thousand plus students were trapped within. Dousing the perimeters and themselves with petrol, the school was lit on fire...

"When the police and firemen arrived at the scene, the school was already a sea of fire. The flames deterred all forms of rescue efforts. But with children's cries issuing from the

flaming building, many firemen still risked their lives rushing headfirst into it. Process was slow. but one by one, the children were being saved...

"With only a few children left in the school, the building started collapsing. If the firemen continued their rescue efforts, chances were they would not make it out alive...

"At that pivotal moment, the leader of the fire brigade turned to the news reporter beside him and uttered into the camera a

statement that I still remember to this day..."

Aleson smiled genially and continued, "The reason why we're is because it's our duty to be here... But that duty's threshold stops before courting certain deaths, and many would agree, saying that we've tried our best... To that I say, is it not our duty as fellow humans to save each other's lives? So please, let us try our best until the very final second!"

"With this brave leader taking

the helm, another twenty eight firemen went back into the barely standing school. And they managed to escort the remaining eleven children out into safety. But at the final moment... the school unfortunately caved in, taking the twenty nine brave souls with it."

"Then Aleson lifted his head from his worktable and with tears rolling in his eyes said, "One of the eleven children that were rescued last was my grandson. He suffered from second-degree burns, but he thankfully survived. He is now a

twenty-year-old university
graduate.

"That is why this music score holds a special place in my heart. It is composed and performed by a world-famous orchestra in remembrance of the lives that were lost in that fire. It is, as Hannah said, called, the Final Second..."

Putting down his voltage testers and other tools of his trade, he declared, "It is our duty as scientists to stand here and find a new source of energy to save

the Hope, but many say that as long as we lay down a clear set of directions, we needn't be risking our lives. There are many less important interns that could be taking our places here...

"To that I say we shouldn't be putting individual values on human lives, because each is equally important. While it is true that the Hope still needs our expertise and experience, and we are indeed categorically more important in that sense... is it not also true that we are the best guardians of hope for the remaining 120000 people? Everyone on the ship, my family

included, relies on hope to keep their dreams and happiness alive, so is it not our duty as fellow human beings to keep that hope burning bright?

"So..."

Aleson, who had been uncharacteristically mild and affable since he stepped on the shuttle, smiled kindly and said,

"I would like to invite everyone present to try our best until the very final second!"

Chapter 56: Hero

In his sharp suit, specially-made spectacles, and handsome comb-over, Aleson, aged fifty then, looked more like a successful businessman than a scientist. The silvery streaks in his hair only added to his general air of stateliness... Nevertheless, that observation might not have been completely false. His team had just invented a new type of superconductor. Its patent alone could ensure Aleson a comfortable life of wealth until his death.

He had just come out of a meeting with important government personnel. Due to the success of his latest research, his request for more grant money was permitted. He also managed to negotiate to have the few obstinate interns in his team fired. He demanded that they be switched out with people that he was comfortable working with, interns that he knew he could bully into submission...

“These ingrates have to be taught a lesson. It is not talent but social sensitivity that will get you places in life,” mumbled Aleson as he flipped through the

newspaper. He was en route to fetch his grandson.

Then, Aleson heard the news about the fire...

He heard those words that shook his heart...

He saw his badly burnt but still breathing grandson being carried away on a stretcher...

He witnessed the school's

collapse and, with it, the firemen's final deed...

That day, Aleson also witnessed himself changing.

He became even more stringent in his work. His team had a 360 degree change as he replaced all the bootlickers. The sole thing that remained constant was his absurdly high standard...

He started nitpicking research results and lab supplies, alienating his government

buddies and fellow colleagues in the process. The high standard he held himself and his team did help him finish many projects, but it also isolated him as a pariah within the scientific community. Even though his track record was indubitably impressive, no one was willing to work with him. He had said it was he who refused to accept the invitation from the US government when they escaped Earth, but reality was, it never their intention to take him along.

So it was to everyone's surprise that such an exiled figure would

selflessly volunteer to lead what was essentially a suicidal experiment.

Preparation for the fated experiment was going well underway. Using Ivan's chemical formula, Hannah had concocted ten sets of potions that could be easily diluted or concentrated according to the situation. Yuan Pin, with Bo Li's aid, was preparing the alien plant sample. Silewei was busy splicing the energy crystal into crystals of different sizes, starting from the smallest 0.01 cubic millimeters to the biggest 10 cubic millimeters.

“Alright, everybody, now that the preparations are complete, I will need to focus on the circuit’s voltage changes. The practical part of the experiment, I shall leave it in your hands,” said Aleson.

Of the remaining four, Silewei was the most senior, but the person most suited for this experiment was the Chinese biologist, Yuan Pin. His ZH hybrid rice plant was deemed one of the best inventions of the decade for being able to single-handedly solves much of earth’s

dwindling food supply dilemma. He was undoubtedly the unnamed leader for this part of the experiment.

“Okay, then let us begin,” Yuan Pin said with a sigh, his breath fogging the glass panel before him.

The shuttle’s interior had been repurposed into a small laboratory. In the center, an area was insulated by walls of glass panels. By using mechanical arms, the scientists could conduct the dangerous

experiment from a distance. Nevertheless, this was, mostly, for show. A flimsy glass panel wouldn't be able to provide much protection in the case of plasmatic explosion.

Yuan Pin retrieved the alien plant sample from the freezer and situated it within a petri dish. The moment the frozen acid around it started to thaw, the plant started squirming. It would take less than ten seconds for the plant to become fully activated and start eating through its surrounding.

Yuan Pin took over the potion that Hannah's mechanical arm handed him. It was the most diluted of all the potions. Simultaneously, Sileiwei cautiously dropped an energy crystal among the mass of plant. The 0.01 cubic millimeter crystal was so small that it was impossible to catch with naked eye.

Thankfully, everything that was happening in the isolated area was projected on a separate screen. The video was, of course, appropriately magnified. When both crystal and acid were poured onto the plant, it stopped

moving. Nevertheless, moments later, its gyration continued. However, its focus had switched to consume the crystal. By the side of the room, Aleson's eyes almost bulged out of their sockets from staring so intently at the voltage gauge.

About ten seconds later, the crystal had completely disappeared. Aleson shook his head, saying, "I'm sorry, there was no electrical response. The crystal was too small. Our previous hypothesis is correct. When the energy released was too small, it will be consumed by the plant itself. It is not a

superconductor, so it still offers a certain degree of resistance.”

Everyone looked defeated, but Yuan Pin said calmly, “No worries, science is all trial and error... This time we’ll use the 0.02 cubic millimeters crystal. Prepare me another potion, but use the same amount of dilution.”

And thus began the second experiment...

Time trudged stubbornly on.

Unlike the people on the Hope, the scientists on the shuttle had paid it no heed; they were too caught up in the experiment. The rest of the Academy, however, stood by the window biting their nails waiting for updates. However, surrounded by the nebula, they knew the updates that they were bitterly waiting for would not arrive. They had to contend with one conclusive end result.

They had been waiting for a full four hours. Tension was high and senses were frayed. A few older scientists had to excuse themselves from sheer

exhaustion. Yao Yuan decided to allow the scientists to rest. In the end, only the Black Star Unit, Jay and a few others remained, waiting for the dreaded result.

“Initiating experiment number 89. We have a 0.05 cubic millimeters energy crystal and potion with a scale-seven dilution.”

Yuan Yin's low voice echoed through the room. In the isolated room, another crystal and splash of acid were dropped

onto the plant. The crystal disintegrated in the blink of an eye and the plant grew slightly bigger. Nevertheless, it still released no energy.

Yuan Pin sighed. “We failed again.”

The sigh was echoed by everyone in the room. Aleson said, agitatedly, “This is impossible. I’ve been to the exploded lab; it was indeed caused by a plasmatic explosion. Why isn’t it releasing any electrical energy now? Have we

missed a step? Or is the chemical formula faulty?”

Hannah replied, “The formula is correct because the plant did indeed choose to break down the energy crystal and not its surrounding glass or metal. This proves that the reversal crystallization was a success, but for some reason, the plant absorbs all the energy instead of releasing it outward... Why is that?”

“You’re right.” Silewei frowned. “Is there any

difference between our
experiments and Ivan's?"

The trio turned to Bo Li in unison. Perhaps unconsciously, despite being men and women of science, they had hoped the superhuman power of their lab assistant could lead them out of this impasse. They could use any form of help then, even the supernatural ones that they on principles didn't set store by.

Bo Li didn't return their gaze but stared blankly ahead at the clump of plant. After a long

while, she said, “I’m sorry, professors. I can’t hear anything in my mind at the moment. I just feel that... we are on the right track. Perhaps our mistake was we were being too careful. We already know the plant will self-absorb energy during the crystallization process, so perhaps we shouldn’t be limiting ourselves to using crystals that are smaller than 0.1 cubic millimeters.”

The four professors turned to look at one another and Aleson started guffawing. “Indeed, the girl is right. We are already laying our lives on the line here,

so why the restraint? Perhaps we're still afraid. Anyway, I second Bo Li's suggestion. We continue with something bigger."

After some more deliberation, they agreed upon using a 0.1 cubic millimeters crystal. As the reagents tipped into the petri dish...

Electrical sparks started bursting on the plant's surface as it consumed half of the crystal. Then the plant started glowing. Without wasting a second,

Aleson connected his circuit to the plant, and the moment they touched, his voltage gauge instantly recorded a high current reading.

“There is it!” Shedding his air of solemnity, Aleson started cheering like a child in a candy store.

Smiles started appearing on everyone’s faces, but before they could celebrate, the plant’s glow suddenly grew in intensity and the reading on Aleson’s gauge went off the charts. Following a

crisp pop, the gauge blew into smithereens, blasting Aleson two to three feet back. The energy had overloaded the circuit.

Even though they knew the crystal could store an astronomically high amount of energy, they never expected it to be this much! The circuit that was specially forged couldn't withhold the released energy?! This was a conundrum that they didn't see coming!

They immediately started

devising a plan, but it was already too late. The plant had consumed the whole crystal. Stray currents were surging through the air. Explosion was imminent.

Aleson picked himself up and ran towards the control panel for the mechanical arm. With an amazing speed, multiple circuit connectors were jammed into the plants. The plant's glow dimmed, but that was not the end of their troubles. The plant was inching towards the remaining crystals that were shaken loose from Silewei's mechanical arm during the

blast. If it consumed those 8 to 9 cubic millimeters crystals, the destruction that it could cause would be beyond calculable.

Right then, a voice whispered in Bo Li's ear.

“The chemical potions! Their concentration! They are too diluted! If they are more concentrated, they can stop the plant! Quick!” yelled Bo Li.

Everyone started moving, especially Hannah. The almost

fifty-year-old chemist rushed to her station and splashed the plant with her strongest potion. It was as Bo Li had said, the plant stopped moving the moment it was hit with the acid. Ten seconds later, the plant was completely lulled back into inactivity. There was no glow left.

As all of this went down, people on the Hope saw lights bursting from within the shuttle. Even against the glowing nebula, it shone so brightly...

The shuttle returned to the Hope six hours and thirty two minutes after their initial departure. They brought back with them the data, ratios, and compositions necessary for the Academy to safely induce the reverse crystallization process within the plant. Without most of the Hope knowing, this team of six had helped it survive another crisis...

Six hours and forty seven minutes after their first experiment, Professor Aleson was declared dead due to heart failure that was caused by electrical shock. At age 72, he

was decorated a hero and had his name recorded into the Hope's Memorial Hall. It was a remembrance of his selfless contribution to the continuity of humanity...

Chapter 57: Darkness of Hope

Calculations were perfectly done by the Academy the day after the experiment was completed on the shuttle. Functional anti-gravitational units were removed from the shuttle to replace the ones that had malfunctioned. More chemical potions were made, alien plant samples were activated, and a 1 cubic millimeter energy crystal was spliced.

A room was transformed into a

unique generator with the plant as agent and energy crystal as fuel.

Naturally, the minute energy crystal couldn't provide enough energy to support the entirety of the Hope. The energy used to keep the air circulation, electrical, and other basic sustenance systems alive on the Hope was astronomical. It could easily rival the energy supply required by a mid-sized metropolis.

Instead, the crystal reactor

would be used to create energy circuits. According to Aleson's theory, a crystal reactor of that size could produce enough circuits within three days to fulfill the Hope's energy demands. It might even have excess energy left to be stored.

This was the Hope's most important objective. Yao Yuan stationed himself outside of the forge basically 24/7. He wanted to make sure everything was done correctly and professionally. As the crystal reactor became more volatile, the initial one percent utility rate of the forge increased

exponentially to an impressive ten percent. As a result, more circuits could be molded. In such a snowballing manner, the Hope's radioactive energy generators were completely exhausted and substituted by the energy crystal reactor on the fifth day.

The Hope's energy supply and demand had finally reached its balance. Then, the Academy came up with an ambitious plan. They wanted to designate part of the Barracks as a crystal reactor silo. It would be much bigger than their temporary one where instead of 1 cubic millimeter

crystal, a 5 cubic millimeter crystal would be used. The plan was to have it replace the Hope's obsolete uranium generators.

This was necessary because of space-warping. Space-warping didn't only require a massive amount of energy, it also needed them in a short burst of time. It was because of this that Noah One's departure was a failure, and why the Hope was designed with three generators.

Their temporary crystal reactor could definitely support the

Hope's energy consumption. They even had a surfeit of energy. Nevertheless, it wasn't intense enough to support space-warping. That was the reason behind the Academy's ambitious plan.

However, when the enormous circuit for the silo was being created, few chemists and biologists halted its progress. According to their analysis, the Hope didn't have the technology to concoct a potion acidic enough to match those naturally secreted by Planet Sahara's fauna. Without that, they couldn't confidently release the

plant mass required for a bigger crystal. To continue would be to create an explosive hazard.

Thus, measurement was tinkered with. The one silo was split into three, each with a 1 cubic millimeter energy crystal reactor. Regretfully, that meant the energy release wouldn't be focused enough to support space-warping...

"In other words, the Hope's everyday energy consumption has been settled, but we still can't commit to space warp?"

Yao Yuan frowned at the scientists gathered before him. He looked through the report handed to him again. It detailed the energy required for a space warp and the energy the Hope could currently support. Needless to say, the difference was big.

The scientists were equally frustrated.

When man was still on Earth, progress was not considered slow, because supply was

limited. There was only so much one could do when everyone clamored for limited resources. However, when man stepped into space, progress was predicted to have an exponential increase because they would be surrounded by limitless resources. The asteroids and moons, these offered precious supplies.

In fact, according to predictions, man would reach this stage of scientific renaissance in the next one hundred years.

Unfortunately for the Hope, the one hundred years in between wasn't accounted for. Their technology was too backwards for... basically everything.

Silewei sighed. "This can't be helped. Our current technology simply can't support a 5 cubic millimeter reactor. Of course, science is always improving. If there is another five, no, three years for the Academy to study, then perhaps we could make this a reality, but now... it's impossible."

Yao Yuan knew of the Academy's difficulties. Sighing, he retrieved from his desk drawer a set of documents. He handed it over to Silewei, whose expression darkened after he gave it a cursory read. The same thing happened with the rest when they were given the documents.

"You can see it for yourself, right? To be frank, this was already a shot in a dark when we escaped Earth. To be able to survive this far with the discovery of a uranium substitute is already beyond my wildest imagination."

Receiving the documents, Yao Yuan chuckled harshly. "The biomes we have are multi-dimensional. Other than the quintessential greenhouses, there are also pig and cow pens. Thanks to a 24-hour sunlight generator and high-quality seedlings, our harvestable periods are greatly shortened. With careful planning, food-wise, the Hope will see no issue.

"But what about long-term plans? Take the fertilizer as an example. We can't keep on using the ones in storage. We'll run

out sooner or later. But where will we find the raw materials to create more? Likewise, there is still storage for the materials used in the crystal reactor now, but we can't expect them to last forever.

"And let's not go into the basics like water and oxygen. The Hope has a perfectly functional water distillation system, but as time goes by, there is bound to be wear and tear. The same could be said of our air circulatory system..."

Yao Yuan continued with a worried tone, "It is good that for now we don't have to worry about the energy issue. According to your report, the reactor could supply the Hope with enough energy for another ten years. But in terms of supplies... we have at most three years. After three years, we will first run out of fertilizer and consequently food, because the base materials for fertilizer, the acids, are all being used for potion creation. Then we will need to worry about clean air and water... So, according to the logistic experts, the Hope can last for a maximum of another three and a half to four years in space."

The scientists were silent. They had led a sheltered life in the Academy, but they could still understand these problems with supplies. It was simple math. They couldn't keep on taking from the store without eventually having to add some back. Furthermore, thanks to their close border to the Workshop, they knew much of the repairing needed within the Hope.

However, if they could find a terrestrial planet or asteroid belt, these issues could be

handily resolved.

They would provide uranium or other radioactive substances to reactivate the Hope's energy generators. With both crystal reaction and radioactive generators, space-warping would be a non-issue. Other than that, the asteroids would contain carbonates and hydroxides that could be synthesized to produce chemical raw materials. As long as the Hope came into contact with these things, survival would almost be guaranteed.

Survival was important because... well, it was humanity's last hope. The Hope had a diverse gene pool from its 120000 citizens, a laudable history that was recorded in the central mainframe, so it was humanity's best chance at continuity...

"Therefore, let us pray."

Setting down the documents, Yao Yuan turned to peer out the window. The bluish tint of the nebula reflected in his eyes as he spoke,

"Pray that this nebula is at its most condescend. Pray that the Hope can escape it within three years... Pray that this bluish glow does signal the presence of a newborn star...

"Finally, let us pray for darkness, an inky darkness of space! I know darkness usually means dread and death, but for us, it means hope because only then will we know we have passed the nebula's outer circumference!"

This paragraph makes no logical sense when compared to the preceding paragraph. If I have to guess, the author meant the circuits were more stable than the raw crystal, and so they can do what the crystal can't.

No idea why it's five days when the author previously said three. If I have to guess, the extra 2 days is to account for the energy used by the forge.

Chapter 58: Hope and Change

The crystal silo ended up having 70 small-sized reactors and three medium-sized reactors. A total of 3,400 plus workers and technicians were part of its construction and everyday maintenance crew. They had even set up a 24-hour security feed.

Thanks to the silo, the Hope's biomes could reach their fullest operation. This, however, required another 5,000 workers, especially in the fields of animal

husbandry, and general farming.

After solving the energy issue, Yao Yuan turned to realize that an array of civic affairs and complaints had been piling up.

First, there was the problem of the living situation. Ever since the Hope left Earth, 120000 civilians were forced to eke out a living in rudimentary camping tents with no access to personal bathroom and kitchen.

Furthermore, these 120000

citizens weren't your run of the mill commoners; they were stringently selected by Yao Yuan's team. These were people with a certain degree of education. It was not wrong nor out of place for them to expect some accountability from Yao Yuan. Three months of suffering under such a derelict situation had led to some weak but gathering grievances.

To be fair, it was not that Yao Yuan had it out for them, it was a product of their circumstances. They were running from an apocalypse and not signing up for a cruise after

all.

Nevertheless, three months of relative peace had leavened out the initial mental strain. People started to have concerns beyond their basic continuity, and issues of living arrangement were at the foremost.

Regarding this issue, Yao Yuan had a more open-minded outlook when compared to Guang Zhen. His years of retirement from the military had mellowed his perspective out quite a bit.

Guang Zhen had a simpler way of looking at things: the Hope offered the people protection, and so they have to take it or leave it. They had no right to complain...

Yao Yuan though wished for a more diplomatic resolution. They were all technically on the same ship. No good would come out of having the citizens and the government at opposing ends.

Yao Yuan could only see two

ways forward: suppression or assimilation. The former would be impossible because there were only 120000 people. Suppression would only bring the authority's own downfall.

So he was left with assimilation, which meant taking the 120000 people into the Hope's inner workings. This way, they could see the problems the Hope was facing and together work past it. This would foster a sense of loyalty and camaraderie.

Therefore, Yao Yuan created a four-tiered medal system. From the highest were the Hero, the Warrior, the Guardian, and the Defender. He then bequeathed upon Aleson the Hero medal and the individuals that passed away on Planet Sahara the Guardian medals.

After that, Yao Yuan initiated a mass recruitment policy.

Vacancies were found within the silo, the biomes, the three specialized districts, and the residential areas...

Following Yao Yuan's order, the experts drafted a plan that could systematically absorb and place 35000 workers. That was the best they could do within a ship of the Hope's size. There were only so many jobs that needed to be done.

Within the next three months, the recruitment was put into motion. According to Yao Yuan's orders, priority was given to applicants with attached families because if they were hired, the authority could solve the living issues of a whole

family at once. The whole family could be relocated to the residential area.

After the three month period, there were still 20000 people living in the campgrounds. These people either had unsuitable expertise or were single, effectively removing them from the priority list.

These last 20000 people, however, proved to be a convoluted dilemma for Yao Yuan. Even though there were still spaces within the residential

area, he couldn't just let them waltz right in. That would be incredibly unfair to the people who got in the formal way, through the application of a job.

In the end, Yao Yuan had no choice but to conscript them as militia reserve. Training would be on Wednesdays and with that, Yao Yuan had a formal reason to relocate them to the residential area.

That, however, did not mark the end of Yao Yuan's engagement with civic affairs.

The next thing he would need to tackle was the Hope's economy...

After a career system was put into place, people naturally would request for salary or at least some form of remuneration. Furthermore, people were fed up with the monthly rations. They hoped that with their earnings would come the freedom of market and choice.

So Yao Yuan began yet another long discussion session with another group of experts and he

knew more sleepless nights
awaited him...

It was six months after the
Hope had left Earth, four
months after the Hope's second
warp...

The first batch of militia
reserve started their training
today.

Jay was a sergeant at this point.
With his pseudo-smiling jowls
and compact build, he looked
dashing in his army fatigue. Men

saluted him when he strolled past the training field while the ladies winked flirtatiously at him.

Jay, however, paid them no heed other than returning hastily the salute. He continued walking to the edge of the field where a team was already in the middle of dispersing. The returning militia saluted him as their paths crossed.

Standing among the dispersing team was Xiao Chen. Noticing Jay walked over, she couldn't

help but be struck by his handsomeness. He had swapped out his usual disheveled look for a clean shave and a fitting uniform. Now she could see why he was successful as a conman: he had that roguish charm about him.

Feeling her heart speed up, Xiao Chen silently pinched her hand. For the past four months Jay had been lurking around her small but comfortable tenement, dropping in to say hi or talk about the weather. She barely gave him any response because there was nothing in her life that she hated more than

conmen. They were the reason
her family...

"You will not talk to him
today!"

Xiao Chen inwardly told
herself. Finally, they were so
close that she could smell the
cologne he was wearing. She
could hear him taking in his
breath, preparing to speak.
What to do? What to do?

"Can't you get the hint, you
giant li..." began Xiao Chen.

To her surprise, Jay walked past her to accost the blonde beauty standing behind her. The girl was twenty two of age and had a curvaceous figure that was barely covered by her militia outfit. Jay stood sheepishly before the girl with golden locks, trading laughs with her. He then asked her on a date, to have dinner at the Barracks' private restaurant, where they served fancy food items...

"You giant liar!" roared Xiao Chen as she made a mental comparison between hers and

the blonde girl's measurements. With uncontainable fury, she swung a kick at Jay's lower calf, then she stalked out of the field, leaving behind Jay, who was doubled over and screaming with pain...

At the same time, the soldiers who were stationed at the bridge to observe the nebula were changing shifts. The shift changed in an interval of four hours. The observation had been going on for four months. To put it simply, there had been no change; the scenery outside the window remained a stubborn palette of blue...

Suddenly, there was sound of shattering glass. Everyone turned to look at the soldier who had dropped his water glass. He seemed transfixed looking through his telescope.

The remaining soldiers knew instantly that something was not right, so they too rushed to join the mesmerized soldier by his window... and, they saw the blue receding. Like an announcement for the advent of night, the sky around them was darkening!

"Quick, contact central command, contact the Major. We... we are leaving the nebulous region!"

By [Hope Calendar](#), on day seventeen of the sixth month, after a five-month-long period of aimless wandering, the Hope was finally getting out of the nebula...

And what opened before them was...

The day the Hope escaped from

Earth was counted as Day 1.

Chapter 59: Target!

Meteorite Belt!

Man has never been so anticipatory of darkness.

Similarly, man has never been so cornered to have all of their hopes placed on one singular group of 120000 people.

At this moment, the Hope was leaving the nebulous cloud and entering the darkness-suffused space. Witnessing the world darkening around them,

everyone on the Hope breathed a collective sigh of relief.

The few months the Hope was travelling around the nebula, things were working out according Yao Yuan's plan. Since he knew suppression wouldn't work, his policy was to try to assimilate the people into the Hope's governmental duties. The aim was to implant into the people's minds that there was no difference between the government and the civilian, that they were all people of the Hope.

The first step was to relocate people from the campgrounds into simple tenements. Simultaneously, this encouraged job applications because that was the prerequisite for better housing. The second step was to purposely leak some information into the public... However, the leak was, for the most part, excessive. People's new jobs had offered them an inkling to the reality that some crisis was assailing the Hope.

The leak merely confirmed their suspicions. After all, these 120000 citizens weren't dummies. They could draw

logical inferences from observations. Rather, the people who underestimated them were the dummies.

Even before the groundbreaking recruitment policy, a section of the public had guessed that the Hope was facing some problems...The fact that their jobs allowed them access into all areas within the Hope with the exception of the Barracks and the biomes only aided more people into understanding the predicaments facing the Hope.

Due to all of these reasons, the public had figured out how many more years the Hope could still linger around in space. Granted their prediction couldn't be as accurate as the experts', they weren't so far off. Therefore, all of the Hope was of one mind that they could only survive five more years in space without landing.

And thanks to the sense of loyalty cultivated by Yao Yuan's policy, even without direct orders, the public started taking steps to care for the Hope. For example, they started policing their food and electricity

wastage. There was a general sense of renewed vigor on the Hope to do the best by the people's temporary home.

However, many realized this vigor belied an underlying fear. If they couldn't find more supplies soon, the Hope was definitely on its last lap towards death.

Hope, though, came ever so suddenly. After a few months of circling around the nebula, the bluish glow that had become familiar to the residents of the

Hope was suddenly replaced by the deep darkness of space.

The moment the Hope got far enough from the nebula's static interference, all of its scouting devices were instantly activated. The reconnaissance took almost nine hours to complete, and its result was promptly collected and sent to the main conference room to be discussed. The discussion was between Yao Yuan and representatives from the Academy.

"As we had anticipated, this is a

newborn star system. The star is evolving from its protostar stage to its main sequence star stage. To be precise, according to our readings of the nebulous cloud, the star could very well be right in the middle of that process. In other words, this is a very young star we've happened upon," an astronomer read from his report.

The birth of a star, according to current understanding, started with the accumulation of nebulous clouds. In its initial stage, the cloud was so widespread that with the naked eye, one would not be able to tell

that it was happening. Perhaps from a distance of 100 light years away, at most, one would be able to detect a barely discernable misty fog.

To be able to witness its glow with man's naked eye meant that the accumulation had reached its latest stage where the concentration of the nebula was at its highest. The next step, according to scientists, would be preparation for the birth of a new star.

The main constituent in a

nebula was the element of hydrogen. When enough of it accumulates, its mass becomes so large that the gravitational energy between the hydrogen atoms will be transmuted into thermal energy. At this stage, a protostar is born. Its core will continue to heat up until it reaches about 7000000 degrees, where nuclear fusion will occur. This reaction increases the protostar's temperature to about one billion degrees, where the surrounding nebula matter is absorbed into the formation of a new star.

And according to the Hope's

surveillance, the star of the system they were in was reaching the end of its formation process. It was collecting the last of the nebula matter around it.

"You mean to tell me that while we were trying to find our way out, we could have wandered into an unstable burning star?" questioned Yao Yuan, with a hint of fear in his voice.

The famous astronomer who stood on the podium replied with a smile, "Don't worry,

Major. Heat coming from a star would be so pronounced that we would have picked up on it through even the nebula. We would not blindly steer the ship into it. Furthermore, it is rather fortunate that a star is forming. It's because it is in such a late formation stage that the nebula cloud around us was so thin. If not, we would not be able to escape it in our lifetime."

Nodding his head, Yao Yuan continued, "Alright, let's put that aside for now. What about intergalactic storms? Is there danger of intergalactic disasters during this stage?"

The astronomer on stage hesitated before breaking into another smile. "I don't think that's possible... Of course, Major, you have to understand that this is the first time we are able to observe this miraculous process at such close range. To witness a burning star absorbing nebula matter, that's every astronomer's dream...

"In any case, the star is currently absorbing matter at a stable rate, which means that its inner temperature is on a slow rise. Until it reaches the main

sequence stage, there won't be any changes that would concern us. In other words, this means that this solar system is also still forming. According to our satellite pictures, there is no observable planet within our observable range. However, there is a cluster of nebula matter half a month of sailing away from our current location. And incidentally, there is a meteorite belt surrounding it.

"According to our observations and calculations, there is a high possibility that this nebula clump will give birth to a gas giant. This means that the

meteorite belt will most probably become an asteroid belt similar to that of Jupiter's. Of course, comparatively speaking, the meteorite belt is much smaller in size, and this leads into the most interesting part of our surveillance..."

The astronomer excitedly punched in some buttons on the podium and soon after, a picture was projected on the wall behind him.

Barely containing his glee, the astronomer pointed at a spot on

the picture, saying, "Everyone, please focus your attention on this spot here. Wait, let me enlarge it...

"What you're seeing here is a more concrete and substantial meteorite belt. In fact, as you can see, **most of the meteorites are slowly coming together!** See, right there!

"This represents the initial stage for the formation of a terrestrial planet! As time goes on, interaction between mass and gravity will pull all of these

materials together and coagulate into a planet. Of course, that might take a few zillion years to complete...

"But what is most important to us is this cluster of meteorites, where the largest is ten times bigger than the Hope. It is our belief that they are rich in minerals like iron, copper, and zinc. Furthermore, it is certain that they contain radioactive substances like uranium ore. Also, I dare say that since this is a forming terrestrial planet, it might even contain minerals that we have not seen before, minerals that disappear after a

planet is formed... These are all valid possibilities!"

The astronomer's final sentence struck a chord with Yao Yuan.

"Then let's start moving! There's where we can refill our stockpile!"

I'm assuming we're talking about another meteorite belt now, since this is now about a terrestrial planet.

Chapter 60: Currency, Press, and Arrival

Finally, everyone on the Hope had a place they could call home. Naturally, with only one bedroom and barely enough space for a living room, these residential tenements were not as luxurious as the ones in the Academy, Barracks, or Workshop. Nevertheless, they still came equipped with a private kitchen and bathroom, and for families with more than 2 children, there might even be an extra bedroom. Spirits were high and contentment reigned.

However, not everyone was as satisfied.

These were the unemployed 20000 people who were still given housing on the basis of militia conscription. They were mostly single and had the smallest tenement, but their special treatment by the Hope had invariably landed them in awkward situations.

With the introduction of currency, people's ID cards could access e-wallets that contained

H-Coins. One H-coin could purchase 1 kilogram of rice or 0.7 kilogram of wheat. For citizens in the militia reserve, monthly allowance was at a mere 120 H-coins, nudging over what would be the equivalency for minimum wage. If a person only survived on simple carbohydrates, like rice and wheat, his monthly expenditure would be around seventy H-coins. However, that was definitely not a life worth living...

Before the economic reformation and flourishing of the market, it wasn't obvious

that people's choices would be restricted. Everyone survived on rice and bread. But now, items like toothpaste, toothbrushes, toiletries, seasonings, and vegetables began to appear as necessities...

With a monthly allowance of 120 H-coins, these basic accoutrements could be covered, but there was definitely no room for luxury.

Furthermore, among the militia reserve, there was a small portion that had families to care

for. It was already a stretch for a single man to survive on a monthly allowance of 120 H-coins, much less a family of three.

Yao Yuan was adamant that there would be no special treatment, but to tide these families over, he had introduced many welfare programs. These included programs aimed specifically at women and children.

On the other hand, citizens that held regular posts, like public

servants, had a monthly allowance of 250 to 300 H-coins. That was a considerable amount of money because it meant they could treat themselves to about two splurges of luxury each month.

For occupations that were more specialized, like technicians or teachers, their allowance was in the range of 350 to 400 H-coins. Police and engineers had 500 H-coins, while scientists had the highest allowance amongst all. Interns at the Academy had 500 H-coins, lab assistants 650 H-coins, regular scientists 700 H-coins, while committee leaders

like Alan and Silewei had 1200 H-coins.

The military had a smaller allowance than the public gave them credit for. Normal soldiers had 200, captains 250, lieutenants 300, and even the Major only took 500. However, these were compensated with government benefits. The military's everyday needs were already subsidized, which meant that their allowance was mostly for luxury purchases.

This was the policy decided

after months of discussion between Yao Yuan and the experts. Even though Guang Zhen felt the policy would lead to a huge wage gap, the experts assured him that the gap would encourage competition which would subsequently lead to societal improvement. Also, even though on paper the gap between the rich and the poor was almost ten times in difference, in reality, after considering benefits and welfare, the difference would be pretty much smoothed out.

Regarding this policy, Yao Yuan had his own understanding... He

believed that capitalism had its flaws, but it bred competition and improvement. For the best chance of survival in space, those are the qualities that he felt the Hope needed. Therefore, Yao Yuan agreed with the experts and approved such a reformation.

With demands came creative pursuit...

With that, Yao Yuan sat waiting, waiting for people to step up...

"Hey, brothers, the internet café is finally open. 0.5 H-coins for one hour of access. I've taken a look-see. They have the new Star Wars 3 game! Let's go blow some virtual aliens' heads!" With a half-smoked cigarette dangling on his lips, Xiao Niao suggested to Qiu Qiu and Dan Dan.

"Blow your head! There's still eleven days to the end of the month and salary day. I don't know about you two, but I only have enough money left for food," Dan Dan replied sulkily.

Qiu Qiu hesitated before announcing, "Damn it! Let's just go, my treat! It's not like we haven't starved ourselves for virtual crap before. I've not touched a computer for almost half a year already and all this computer talk is making my hands itch!"

Instead of egging him on, Xiao Niao sighed and patted Qiu Qiu on his shoulder. Sitting down, he groaned, "Never mind, forget it. It was my fault for bringing this up. Before this it was also under my urging that we recklessly bought cigarettes and beers... What to do, brothers?"

Who knew the three of us would be living from salary to salary?"

Reflecting his two friends' gloomy expressions, Dan Dan sighed. "Actually, there's one thing that has been bothering me. All ninety something of us are victims of the fever, so why has the government chosen only about ten of them to join the military and had the rest of us sent back to our civilian lives? How I wish we were one of those selected few, their everyday meals are taken care of by the military and on top of that have 200 extra H-coins to spend. Tell me, how is that fair?"

"Xiao Niao, of the three of us, you are the brightest. Can you tell us why we weren't selected even though we were specially recruited?" asked Qiu Qiu.

Xiao Niao steepled his hands in thought. "How am I supposed to know? Maybe those selected have something special about them, but what, I have no clue..."

His friends followed with a succession of sighs. Dan Dan lamented, "Money, oh, money,

the source of all evil. Damn it, if God would give me a few thousand H-coins now, I swear I would have lobster, steak, and wine while I hang out at the café all day. If I hear even a squeak of saving for the future, I'll drown that person in my sea of H-coins!"

While his two friends continued lamenting their fate, Xiao Niao could hear two cleaners discussing the Hope's upcoming supply landing. The momentous landing was scheduled to occur in about ten days. They were discussing how to approach the supply

gathering as if they were the experts.

Right then, Xiao Niao could feel his surroundings going quiet; even the sounds of his friends felt like they were coming from far away. Little by little, clues aligned in his mind and a conclusion was slowly reached...

"The currency release, wage gap... I know it now! Why the militia training ended a few days ago, the government is waiting for us to get into action!"

Xiao Niao grew more excited as he went on, but he made sure to keep his voice low, to ensure his thoughts stayed within only his two friends' hearing range.

Both Qiu Qiu and Dan Dan looked at their friend confusedly. Qiu Qiu interjected, "Bro, have you gone insane thinking about money? Earth to Xiao Niao, Earth to Xiao Niao, it's time to wake up."

Xiao Niao replied, with a mysterious smirk, "You're the one that's insane! I say, brothers,

didn't you two say you wish for a bunch of H-coins? I might have a plan that can make that happen."

"What plan?" his friends replied in unison. "Have you thought of any jobs that are perfect for the three of us?"

"Not job," Xiao Niao said with a wicked smile. "but an entrepreneurship!"

The next day, the trio using their future six-month's worth

of salary as deposit, took out a loan from the government. With that loan, they bought several reams of paper, rented a few printers, and hired a handful of reporters and editors...

One week later, the very first issue of Hope Weekly came fresh out of the press. Sold at the price of 0.2 H-coins per copy, it was released every Monday, detailing the general location of the Hope, the vacancies available, harvest reports from the biomes, jokes, civil affairs, and the like...

In just under one week, the Hope Weekly held an impressive 20000 copies sold number. Another week after that, the government offered workers, printers, and papers to help institutionalize the Hope Weekly as the Hope's first news agency. As its main shareholders, Xiao Niao, Qiu Qiu, and Dan Dan had indeed struck gold.

Many on the Hope were inspired by the trio's success story. The ship was wrapped in an atmosphere of conscientious fervor as it sailed towards the meteorite belt...

Man's first ore mining
operation in space was going to
initiate soon!

Chapter 61: Space Mining

On the seventh month and second day of the Hope Calendar, the Hope successfully arrived at the gas giant's meteorite belt. According to the calculations made by the central mainframe, this was the safest distance for the Hope because even though they were still about 50 kilometers away from the mineable meteorite cluster, they were safe from collision with stray meteorites. Nevertheless, additional missiles were prepared for cases where crash was inevitable.

Other than that, the shuttle was given another upgrade so that it could serve as a mining vessel. Two giant mechanical arms and a collection chute were added. Harvested minerals could be transferred through the chute to be deposited inside the shuttle.

Naturally, a single shuttle couldn't satisfy the needs of 120000 people. Therefore, it was understood that this was supposed to be a trial run. The aim was to check whether these minerals contained any harmful

elements and to check whether they were worth harvesting. After the experience on Planet Sahara, everyone on the Hope was that much more wary when approaching this alien situation.

After preparation had been done, at two in the afternoon, several scientists, engineers, and two soldiers boarded the mining shuttle. A few minutes later, they departed from the Hope for the meteorite cluster.

The shuttle crossed 50 kilometers in the blink of an eye.

Without further permission, they wouldn't venture deep into the cluster. Instead, they hovered by its perimeter where a 2 cubic meters asteroid was collected.

The whole process was conducted under the watchful eye of the Hope's surveillance, which had been restored to its full capacity after they left the nebula. It is worth mentioning that even though man's technology then was still too amateur for actual space-travel, it remained a source of comfort for citizens of the Hope because they already had the best man

could offer.

To garner morale, visuals of man's first space mining operation were projected on monitors all over the Hope. [The Hope News Agency](#) was even doing a live broadcast. A sense of excitement could be felt all over the Hope that night.

"Good evening. As you can see on the screen, the shuttle is harvesting its first asteroid, and its size appears to be around 2 cubic meters. At the moment, the asteroid is now firmly in the

mechanical arms' grasp. They only need to send it into the chute now. According to updates from the Workshop, operations on the shuttle are running smoothly. This operation you are witnessing on the screen right now is run by a Mr. Hanzo Bick. Mr. Hanzo used to be a marine salvage operator, so I have faith that this operation is in good hands."

In contrast to the military feed videos, which were laden with statistics, the visuals broadcast to the public came attached with an anchor. The female anchor was a seasoned journalist and

newscaster. According to rumors, she was previously affiliated with a famous American news organization and was the Hope News Agency's first hire.

"Dear viewers, now we have to be patient because analysis of the asteroid will take about three to six hours. We know that space is full of unknown dangers, so before we are certain of the actual components of this asteroid, the shuttle is not allowed back into the Hope. On that note, we have here on set Professor Yuan Bin, the world-famous biologist. Now Professor

Yuan Bin, can you help explain to our audience the possible dangers this asteroid could contain..."

At that moment in command central, Yao Yuan and everyone else were glued to the main monitor, the shuttle's channel of communication. This was where people got firsthand knowledge regarding the space mining operation.

Zhang Heng, Jay, and a few members of the Black Star Unit though were watching the

evening news on a smaller screen nearby. When Yuan Pin appeared on screen, Zhang Heng said quizzically, "Professor Yuan Pin? Didn't he say he detests these showy news programs? Why would he agree to an appearance now? I was expecting a normal science expert, not the Hope's best in biology."

Without taking his eyes away from the monitor, Yao Yuan answered, "I told him to make an appearance. This is to stop baseless speculation that makes people charge aimlessly into danger during emergencies, like

how they did on Planet Sahara... Other than that, haven't you noticed? Professor Yuan Pin is speaking in Chinese."

"He is indeed explaining everything in Chinese. What about it?" Guang Zhen asked, with a hint of interest.

"Notice that he's speaking Chinese and the screen has English subtitles... Still not getting it?" Yao Yuan shook his head, chuckling. "At the moment, there are about ten main languages being used on

the Hope, the most common ones being Chinese and English. The rest includes French, German, Russian, Korean, and Japanese. In any case, it's complicated and it doesn't serve our cause of uniting the people. To do that, we need a lingua franca.

"There is still some time before we need to formalize an official language, but when that need arises, my choice is Chinese. Therefore, I've requested experts like Professor Yuan Pin to appear on these shows and speak in Chinese to implant into the people's mind the

importance of the Chinese language."

After Yao Yuan finished, everyone in the room started speaking in Chinese, which left Jay alone in the dark. Only Zhang Heng noticed Jay's confused expression and patted him consolingly on his shoulder... (The poor fella, looks like he might need to put some extra effort into learning a new language, but then again, the girl he was chasing, I remember quite distinctly was a language expert. Maybe she could be of help.)

Simultaneously, out in the shuttle, experiments were being expertly carried out. First, the asteroid was spilt in half. Then, various experiments were conducted on the rock's outer surface, inner layers, and its core. Their chemical make-up, mineral composition, and even possible sentience were given a thorough sweep.

At around four in the afternoon, initial reports showed that while the asteroid contained no microbes or viruses, its components were

incredibly complex. It contained multiple metallic and non-metallic compounds, carbon dioxide, ice particles, and most importantly, radioactive substances!

This meant that among this meteorite cluster there were some meteorites that contained radioactive deposits!

Scientists from the Academy cheered in happiness when they were relayed this news. Their hypothesis had been proven correct. During the formation of

a new solar system, it is going to be suffused with ample minerals. They cheered because this meant that the Hope was going to get a timely restock of their supply!

And this included energy needed for space-warping!

According to the mass spectrometer, the asteroid consisted of rich elements that could be transmuted through processes like electrolysis to produce water, oxygen, chemicals, fertilizers, mineral

ores, and even raw materials for drugs!

The significance it represented couldn't be understated!

This meant that as long as the solar system suffered no great tragedy, the Hope could stay within this system indefinitely! Using the materials supplied by these asteroids and meteorites, man could very well build a space base. While waiting for the terrestrial planet to form, assembly of new spaceships like the Hope could be initiated.

Landing could occur when the planet is ready and the Hope's technology by then should be more capable to terraform the planet into man's new home planet!

"Have we finally... found a new home?"

Yao Yuan saw celebration erupt across the Hope through the monitor, but a sneaking wariness prevented him from sharing in the people's joy. That wariness came from...

The fiery newborn star...

Name of the news agency
created in the previous chapter.

Chapter 62: Blueprint

At eight PM that night, the mining shuttle returned safely to the Hope, carrying along with it the analyzed asteroid piece.

The asteroid was covered with multiple layers of insulation to prevent exposure to the Hope's air. After all, the reports they had so far had been results from the makeshift lab in the shuttle, so for absolute safety, the asteroid still needed to go through more experiments conducted within the Academy.

As captain, Yao Yuan was present when the shuttle arrived at the Hope's hangar. He approached each team member individually and sincerely thanked them. He knew that it might seem weak to have the captain bow down to his citizens, but these people had risked their lives going on the mining shuttle. He owed them that much.

Then, the whole Academy threw itself into analyzing this asteroid. It was dissected from multiple angles, not only from

the biological and chemical. The analysis carried on through the night, but not one whisper of complaint was heard. On the contrary, most scientists were giddy with excitement. This was, after all, a groundbreaking discovery.

All of the analysis drew to an end the following morning, and all the data was promptly compiled and sent to Yao Yuan.

As he sifted through the technical-term-laden reports, Yao Yuan was glad he had spent

his free time reading up on the sciences. If not, he would have felt he had failed the Hope.

Other than that, Yao Yuan was immensely grateful that they had spent resources to locate these brilliant minds before they departed from Earth. Throughout their journey so far, both institutions of Academy and Workshop had proved invaluable to the Hope. For example, they were indispensable on Planet Sahara and later when they were trapped in the nebula as well.

According to their reports, the asteroid was confirmed to not contain any harmful microbes. It also showed no traces of housing any living organisms.

Secondly, the asteroid was made up of a myriad of components, some metallic and some non-metallic, but most of them were complex compounds or oxides. Therefore, their empirical form could be broken down through the usage of chemical processes like electrolysis.

However, according to the Academy's hypothesis, asteroids that could be found within the cluster were too fractured to be mined. Mining efforts would have been wasted anyway since their small size meant that they couldn't carry much minerals.

Comparatively speaking, the forming terrestrial planet that was two-month journey away from the Hope showed much better promise. The asteroids gathered around it were much bigger in size. In fact, the biggest among them had become the planet's core. Its big size meant that it had the strongest

gravitational pull, which in turn ensured that its surrounding cluster would remain stabilized throughout the planet's formation. Because it was forming a terrestrial planet, the Academy was certain that it would be filled with minerals that the Hope needed.

Closing the reports, Yao Yuan grew deep in thought.

The reports expressed two opposing opinions. One party felt that the Hope should depart for the forming terrestrial

planet immediately. According to their satellite pictures, the biggest asteroid among that cluster was spacious enough to allow the Hope to land. Furthermore, its impressive size promised a wealth of minerals and radioactive fuel.

The other party quoted the unknown dangers of space. They advocated for a safer method, which was to stay and harvest the close meteorite cluster. Even though they wouldn't contain much deposit, the Academy calculated that the amount they could provide was more than enough to support two to three

space warps. Therefore, instead of putting all their bets on the terrestrial planet, the safer route would be to harvest everything around them first before leaving for the terrestrial planet.

Both sides had their pros and cons, but the second option had the support of over 70% of the scientists. It incidentally was the option Yao Yuan was leaning towards too.

However, the second option had a fatal drawback. To prevent collision, the Hope would not be

able to enter the meteorite cluster. In fact, some of the scientist even felt that the 50 kilometers distance they currently held was not secure enough. The safest distance, according to this group, was about 100 to 200 kilometers away.

In any case, the Hope couldn't participate in the mining itself. The mining had to be done through the shuttle or vehicles the size of the shuttle.

The issue was that the Hope

had only one functional shuttle left. Furthermore, they couldn't just blindly pick an asteroid and mine. Space mining was much more complicated than that. Selection had to be carefully made based on size and surface conditions, not to mention the shuttle couldn't carry a very large load. It would take nine months to mine the amount the Hope needed, and this was without counting the supplies that would be lost in those nine months...

"Is there no other way than to go with option one?" Yao Yuan rubbed his frowning forehead,

thinking.

As he continued to sift through the stack of reports, he happened upon one written by Bo Li, one half of the Hope's pair of known Whisperers... The other was Ivan, who was still on life support. The Hope's futuristic medical tech had kept him alive, but he needed a skin transplant before he could make a full recovery.

Bo Li's report came attached with a blueprint for a simple mining airship. It was about

fifteen times smaller than the shuttle, its interior could sit two to three people, and it had rudimentary communicative equipment and life support that would allow its passenger four to five hours of action in space. It was armed with a pair of mechanical arms but had no room for storage. Its small size allowed it to venture easily into the cluster and literally lug the selected asteroids back unto the Hope...

The locomotive, if it could even be called that, was nothing more than a moving box. Other than a system to moderate oxygen,

temperature, and pressure, it came attached with nothing extra. Even the navigation system was simplified into a one-screen panel that controlled both speed and direction.

Because of its extreme simplicity, Bo Li's design required little resources to build. According to Bo Li's calculations, the Workshop could pump out five to seven of these machines daily. The number might increase to ten after they were familiar with the process.

"Could this even work...?"

Ten minutes later, Yao Yuan came to find Bo Li calculating something in one of the labs.

Bo Li had a pretty face, but she usually paid no heed to the upkeep of her appearance. Most of the time, she appeared looking disheveled and disinterested. When Yao Yuan asked her about her airship design, Bo Li snapped her fingers, uttering, "It has exploded."

"What has exploded? What do you mean?" Yao Yuan asked, slightly alarmed.

"It has exploded," repeated Bo Li, stressing the pronoun. Noticing Yao Yuan's flummoxed expression, she moved to a nearby computer with a tsk. Soon, a simulation appeared on the monitor.

In the simulation, as the airship returned to the Hope heavy with minerals, it started to combust. Before long, the airship exploded in a fiery shower. Right

then, a GAME OVER message flew over the screen while Yao Yuan broke out in cold sweat.

"The airship couldn't use the shuttle's engine. This is because they have different sizes and thus different energy consumption. The engine obviously needs some tweaking, but that is a modification that I can't complete on my own in such a short time," said Bo Li openly.

Yao Yuan was ready to leave, but Bo Li's statement pulled him

back. Excitedly, he asked, "Is that so? Then is it possible for us to design and build this mini engine with our current technology?"

"Of course." Bo Li narrowed her eyes haughtily, saying, "There is no problem with my blueprint. The issue is just that it needs a specially-designed engine..."

Yao Yuan suddenly broke into a hearty laugh while patting Bo Li lightly on her head. This earned him some deadly stares, but he paid them no attention as he

turned to saunter out of the room.

That afternoon, Yao Yuan gathered specialists from the Academy and Workshop to introduce Bo Li's blueprint and discuss the engine issue...

Three days later, the first mini engine was successfully created. Everyone on the team was given a 50 to 100 H-coins bonus. Bo Li as the lead designer had a 250 H-coins bonus. After that, the Hope poured its effort into building the mining airship

prototype.

"Two hundred and fifty..."

Bo Li saw the numbers appeared on screen, notifying her of a new inbound transfer. She smirked condescendingly.

"How old are you already to still be doing childish things like this...?"

"Also, between the two of us,

you're the idiot here, not me!"

250 in Chinese also referring to an idiot.

Chapter 63: The Prototype

Three days after that, at about three in the afternoon, a prototype of the mining airship was assembled. After that, it was sent to the Workshop to be fitted with simple AI and an autopilot system.

It was already nine at night when all the necessary components were added. However, with the exception of internet cafes, which normal citizens couldn't afford and specialists had no time to visit,

the Hope did not have much of a night life. Therefore, even though testing of the prototype could very well go deep into the night, everyone on the team was in support of working late.

While being remotely piloted by an experienced engineer, the prototype took its first shaky steps into space.

Looking at the surveillance monitor, Yao Yuan nodded approvingly. “This remote control system is working brilliantly. Is it possible to have

all the airships be remotely controlled so that we can cut the risk of having people inside?”

The engineer shook his head, explaining, “Major, I’m sorry to report, but this remote control system is only usable within a short distance. Due to interference, like radioactive and intergalactic waves, control will be lost after ten kilometers...

“Furthermore, the meteorite cluster has a complicated landscape. I doubt a remote-

controlled airship will be able to traverse it well.”

Yao Yuan debated before ceding to the engineer’s argument. His days in the military had introduced him to the usage of drones. He had learned how complex terrain could prove fatal to remotely controlled devices.

Then, a soldier walked into the room. He was summoned because he used to be an operator for military drones.

On the monitor, the prototype could be seen slowly wading out from the Hope. It had a slow waddle, but it appeared to be extremely receptive. Whenever the operator issued a command, the prototype would instantly follow.

“Next, let us increase its speed to 70 percent,” suggested the engineer.

After the operator pressed on a button on the remote control, a burst of flame came out of the prototype’s combustion engine.

The prototype, propelled by the flame, gained a burst of speed, exposing its weaknesses in the process. It showed signs of delayed reaction when it was ordered to brake or turn under high speeds.

Test driving took almost an hour, and Yao Yuan left with another stack of reports.

Experts unanimously agreed that the prototype was relatively stable. It had the quality of a 21st century product.

Nevertheless, its propulsion system, especially in terms of its lack of speed increase and negative influence on dexterity, left much to be desired. This was, however, the nature of a rocket-based propulsion system. Without a magnetic propulsion system, which man's technology at the time didn't allow, these issues weren't going to be easily fixed.

This, however, did not mean that the experts didn't give it their best shot. Right after the test drive was wrapped up, an emergency meeting was held to improve and modify the

propulsion system. An agreement was made to decrease the power of the system since the small airship would not require such powerful propulsion. This in turn preserved the airship's natural dexterity...

With that, another series of tests was implemented...

Zhang Heng could be found in the simulation chamber. He was practicing his piloting skills because he was personally ordered by Yao Yuan to pilot the

official mining airship. It was an honor, but to be frank, he was quite miffed. “Why has an important, and not to mention deadly, mission fallen on my shoulders again” was the question he was struggling with.

A question to which Yao Yuan answered, “Because you’re the only Diviner we have on the Hope. Having access to visions of incoming danger allows you enough time to push the airship’s ejector button, which will propel you out into space. Its life support will keep you alive for about another hour while the Hope moves to rescue

you. In other words, you're our safest bet."

That was why Zhang Heng was miffed. It was all in all a solid argument, one that he couldn't refute. That was also the explanation as to why he had been lugging his long face around the Hope for the past two days.

"Hey, Zhang Heng, where's the meal you promised you were going to treat us to today?"

A female voice asked. He turned to see Ning Xue and Mao Miao staring at him. Ning Xue folded her arms, looking at him accusingly, while Mao Miao stared innocently.

Zhang Heng was stumped before finally remembering his promise to the ladies when they dropped by his house to have dinner a few days ago. The topic of discussion was about how their monthly allowance of 120 H-coins as students could barely afford them anything beyond the basics.

Ever since boarding the Hope, Zhang Heng had gotten much closer to both Ning Xue and Mao Miao. For one, they were in each other's debt, and for another, all three of them were around the age of seventeen to eighteen.

In a weak bout of machismo, Zhang Heng boasted about his considerable salary as a lieutenant and the many benefits that were accorded to him. One thing led to another, and dinner ended with him promising the two ladies a scrumptious meal at the Barracks' Restaurant the coming Saturday.

And today was a Saturday...

Laughing awkwardly, Zhang Heng hedged, “Right, today is a Saturday... Okay, a promise is a promise.”

The two girls squealed in delight as Zhang Heng led the way to the restaurant.

The Barracks’ Restaurant was only a name since its clientele was beyond the members of the

Barracks. Its name and location was such because it was directly owned by the government. Nevertheless, it was the best eatery there was on the Hope. It was staffed with the best chefs and freshest ingredients. It was the place people visited when they had an occasion to splurge on.

When they were seated, the two girls wasted no time with their orders. Their orders included caviar, steak, wine, fruit salads, and desserts. It was obvious that both girls came from an affluent background. In fact, Zhang Heng could recall

Ning Xue saying they had both previously attended Ivy League schools.

As the night progressed, Zhang Heng could feel his pressure shedding away. The food was delicious and he was in good company. He got increasingly relaxed as conversations moved to topics that reminded him of his previous life, topics like designer drugs, race cars, and nightly clubbing. Lost in the haze of nostalgia, they were unaware that their voices had gone beyond their little party of three.

“Look at what we have here... A good-for-nothing rich kid and his two little stuck-up princesses. What a party... I will never understand why the Hope would admit people like you three. You sure you didn’t buy your way in...?”

A brash voice asked condescendingly, and it was followed by a chorus of patronizing laughs. Simultaneously, a hand clamped down hard on Zhang Heng’s shoulder.

Zhang Heng quickly recovered from his shock. Based on the different voices he heard, he could tell that there were about three or four men. Needless to say, they didn't respond kindly to the rich...

However, Zhang Heng knew that he couldn't back down in the company of his two lady friends. Furthermore, after his experience on Planet Sahara, he was no longer the witless kid. After swiping the hand off his shoulder, he stood to turn and face the offenders.

The group comprised of a soldier and a few civilian militia. They were all about 20 years old. The eldest among them looked about 22 or 23, and he was the one who clamped down on Zhang Heng's shoulder. Scowling with derision and condescension, they obviously meant harm.

Zhang Heng was in his civilian clothes because he had taken off his Black Star Unit uniform after military hours. However, recognition instantly dawned on the soldier after he stood up to

face them... After all, the Hope had only so many lieutenants, so it was pretty impossible for him to not get recognized. Instantly, the soldier stammered, “Lie... Lieutenant Zhang, I did not realize it was you...”

Zhang Heng was secretly relieved that the confrontation was to be avoided, but on the surface, he smirked. “So this is how the military treats its citizens... I will see all of you at the disciplinary unit first thing tomorrow!”

The soldier immediately stood at the ready, replying, "Yes, sir!" After that, he stood dazed, rooted to the ground. His friends were even more flustered, especially the one who clapped Zhang Heng on the shoulder; his face was completely blanched.

Unwilling to attract more unnecessary attention, Zhang Heng dismissed them. As he sat back down, both Ning Xue and Mao Miao gazed at him with admiration.

Zhang Heng was flattered but unsure as to how to respond. He had had these looks directed his way before, but those were through flaunting of his cash; he had never impressed girls with his stature before. Gulping his glass of wine, he offered, “Ning Xue, Mao Miao, we aren’t who we used to be anymore. This is no longer Earth, and we no longer have our families to back us up. I’m now a soldier and you’re students... So study hard. You might not notice the difference now, but sooner or later, you’ll see that times have changed...”

That night, Zhang Heng had gained a new understanding of his post.

He had a renewed appreciation of the phrase “with great power comes great responsibility.” He had to act in a way that befitted his name and rank, as he was no longer the rich kid, and for the first time, he no longer wanted to return to those days...

Because he was his own man now, he was Zhang Heng, a Black Star Unit member!

Hidden from their view at the corner of the restaurant sat Yao Yuan. He witnessed everything, and after hearing Zhang Heng's lecture, he couldn't help but wear a proud smile on his face...

The next Monday at 10 AM, the mining airship departed from the Hope. It was piloted by Zhang Heng...

An hour later, the first manual test drive had proved successful. Its data fitted The Academy's prediction and analysis. Next, the Hope started mass

producing these airships. On Friday, a 20-sized fleet departed from the Hope. They returned with more than fifty tons of minerals, and one of them had a radioactive deposit that was predicted to be able to provide more than 8,000 grams worth of yield...

Chapter 64:

Transformation!

"Breaking News! Breaking News! the Hope's self-designed mining apparatus was a glowing success. Some experts touted it as man's latest big discovery..."

"Breaking News! Breaking News! The first mining expedition came back with more than 50 tons of load! With a rising number of mining airships, the yield is predicted to increase to more than 1,000 tons in future expeditions!"

"Breaking News! Breaking News..."

Early in the morning, the Hope's lowest three floors, which also housed the civilian tenements, reverberated with cries of children hawking "Hope Weekly." These were newsboys hired by the Hope News Agency to peddle their publication. They were strategically placed at public places like spots where people tagged in their ID cards to increase sales coverage.

The price of Hope Weekly had increased from its initial 0.2 H-coins to 0.5 H-coins. With only four issues each month, the expenditure added up to a measly monthly payment of 2 H-coins. Even for the lowest income citizens, the militia reserve with their monthly allowance of 120 H-coins, it was still pretty affordable.

For only 2 H-coins per month, people had access to what was basically the Hope's sole source of affordable entertainment and current news.

In a roadside stall sat Xiao Niao, Qiu Qiu, and Dan Dan. The leisurely way the three men enjoyed their breakfast was a heavy contrast to the stream of people rushing by.

It was Qiu Qiu who started the conversation. "Nice, it looks like we're going to break 40000 sales this week. And to think I was afraid the price hike would affect Hope Weekly's sales, now it seems like I was overthinking again. It was indeed the right decision handing over the agency's operation to the government. We are already pretty damn rich after earning

the stock dividends."

With his mouth stuffed with food, Dan Dan nodded aggressively in agreement.

Xiao Niao, though, smiled knowingly. "It was not only the right decision, it was our only possible decision. You have to understand how much the power the Hope Weekly holds as the Hope's only body of media. Media has always been the government's watchdog, so there is no way our semi-militaristic government would

let us hold on to the ownership of the Hope Weekly. Thanks to that leverage, we were given a monthly collection of ten percent stock dividend, and that is indeed a good deal. Also, with the inevitable increase in population and thus sale, the amount we will receive will only increase."

His two friends nodded silently. After taking a few bites of his fritters, Xiao Niao suddenly laughed, a booming laugh that attracted a few raised eyebrows. Undeterred, he said, "Bros, quickly finish your breakfast. After this, we're going to hit the

internet café. Star Wars 3 and World of Warcraft 4, we're gonna sit there until they throw us out!"

As people rushed to work, almost every single one of them held a copy of Hope Weekly in their hands. Most zoned in on the return of 50 tons of ores, but few paid notice to the mining airship, and deep impression were left on those who did.

Simultaneously, the Workshop was working overtime to distill the minerals and to build more

mining airships. The place was understandably hectic.

"Are we that short on staff?" Yao Yuan asked as he looked through the daily reports, many of which mentioning the lack of staff.

During the recruitment, many general workers were recruited, but since both construction of mining crafts and distillation of ores required specialized knowledge, the lack of specialized staff was a serious issue.

However, this could be handily resolved by movement of workers and the introduction of training schemes.

Therefore, Yao Yuan was not seriously worried. Au contraire, he was rather relieved at their general progress. In fact, his relief was shared by many who were in the know.

First, with the success of space mining, they had access to the much needed radioactive fuel. Furthermore, the mining had

also filled their stock of raw materials for fertilizers, chemicals, and medicine.

The oxides could be distilled to extract oxygen to supply the Hope's air circulation system, and its by-product of hydrogen could be compounded to create water.

The metal ores could be recycled to produce more mining airships, creating a lucrative cycle. The buzz of activity also meant that the people of the Hope had pretty

much settled into life in space, and the underlying sense of anxiety had dissipated. These were all good news.

Yao Yuan approved most of the Workshop's reports and turned to look at the reports from the Academy.

There was not much worth noting in the reports. They were filled with observations of the asteroid pieces, details like their mass, colors, and size, in other words, details that were important to the scientists but

not to Yao Yuan.

However, one of them did grab Yao Yuan's attention.

It was a joint report between a biological and a chemical engineering committee, detailing the possibility of using the alien plant to help with the mining process.

Yao Yuan knew that the plant was engineered with that purpose in mind and had a strong enough constitution to

not require air and water to survive, but what if they ended up not able to control the plant, or what if they had an accidental handling of the plant? There were simply too many risks involved.

In conclusion, if the purpose of using the plant was only to speed up the process, Yao Yuan would rather they take it slow.

And of course, somewhere in the middle of the report, it mentioned something that greatly piqued Yao Yuan's

interest.

It detailed the final product collected from the plant's harvesting was not only incredibly pure, but it also contained valuable alloys that man's technology couldn't manufacture at this time. In fact, most of the uses of these alloys were unknown. They were durable enough to make coverings for weapons and spaceships, but beyond that, they had no discernible uses.

The exception was one of the

alloys which had superconductivity. It was probably the purest superconductor man had ever come into contact with. It could conduct a high amount of electricity across a long distance.

According to the report, if these alloys were used to supplement the Hope's existing energy circuit and engines, the Hope's space warp would be much more stabilized, to the extent where the degree of damage during warp would approach zero and the Hope could also commit to better logistics!

Yao Yuan almost jumped out of his seat in excitement when he read that paragraph. After he went through the report a few more times, he ordered the leaders of the two committees, a few physicists and Bo Li, to central command.

When everyone was there, Yao Yuan passed the report around, and after everyone had a read of it, he asked, "We know the biggest problem facing the Hope at this moment is the issue of space warp, namely its logistics and stability.

"When the Hope's load increases, the amount of energy required for space warp will have an exponential increase. This is the reason why we couldn't carry more supply and people with us when we departed from Earth. It was simply unfeasible."

Gesturing at the cluster of meteorites outside the window, Yao Yuan sighed. "Many were overjoyed when we came across this clump of space rocks, because they thought that we could carry the whole group of

them on the Hope, and that would single-handedly solve the Hope's shortage of supply. I'm sorry to say that is not possible, because the Hope has a load limit. We are collecting as much supply as we can at the moment, but when the time comes, we will have to jettison a great part of that..."

Yao Yuan looked everyone straight in their eyes, saying, "If the plants can help with this issue, I need an affirmative answer! Could the alloys created by these plants really improve the Hope's functionality during warp?"

"You have free reign to all resources, including the alien planet, so go get me the answer!"

"A simple yes or no answer!"

Chapter 65: A Change Shall Come!

Science is cautious; it will not have a seismic change on the word of a person, even if said person is the leader of man. Therefore, even if Yao Yuan demanded it, the scientists would not provide the answer to his question on the spot.

This is especially true when we take into consideration the bunch of scientists Yao Yuan was pressuring. They were powerful people in their respective fields. It was not based on ingenuity

alone that they reached the heights they were at; they would not be easily pushed.

Yao Yuan was befuddled as to why his commands had had no discernable effect. The scientists paid him no heed. Instead, they ignored him and started discussing the research details of the joint committees. The slew of scientific jargon made Yao Yuan feel even more like an outsider.

After the discussion had reached its conclusion, a

representative informed Yao Yuan that the Academy would require more time to conduct more tests before it could provide Yao Yuan with a definite answer.

Hearing that, Yao Yuan was relieved. While the discussion was going on, he was starting to second-guess the tone he used in his directives. The matter was urgent, but the scientists knew that as well; it was perhaps too harsh for him to push them like that.

Therefore, in the following hours, he knew that he had to restrict himself from dropping by the Academy every few minutes to check up on their progress. Thus, he shifted his attention to the still ongoing mining operation.

However, before long, people started approaching him with requests, conflicts, and petitions. These included military, civil, and political matters.

Before this, space warping and

adventures on Planet Sahara had kept the Hope incredibly occupied. Other than issues of delegation, Yao Yuan didn't have much to worry about.

However, with the advent of civilian tenements, currency, and a burgeoning work force, the things Yao Yuan had to look after had increased multifold. Added to that was the matter of space mining, so Yao Yuan's plate was full.

Therefore, he was seriously considering erecting a

government.

If he were to go through with the idea, Yao Yuan knew that he would have to veto the idea of having an election. He knew that he would get a landslide victory in the first few elections, so why not skip the formality? Furthermore, he was unsure of whether or not having elections would lead to true democracy on the Hope.

They were, after all, in space. Their situation was much more volatile and elections would only

allow the dissidents an easy channel to provoke anarchy. Also, he was certain that the elected representative would not be as good at the job as he was; he was sure they would falter under the pressure.

Therefore Yao Yuan was clear that a democratic government was impossible. For the sake of the people, he had to keep reign over unassailable political and military rights.

On the other hand, the system couldn't be absolutely

dictatorial. Yao Yuan was sure that he was a fair leader, but he couldn't say the same about other people in power. There needed to be some form of check and balance.

This meant that a House of Representatives [not Senate] was necessary.

Then, there was the issue of legislation. Obviously a distinction was needed between military law and civil law. However, Yao Yuan felt that they needed also a space law, law that

pertained to the Hope and its survival. There must be a hierarchy between the three laws, and the space law could even be the basis of the Hope's constitution, but those were matters to be discussed with legal experts.

After that, he had to deal with the multiple branches and departments. There had to be a Department of Military Affairs that handled everything related to the Hope's army, from space exploration to army recruitment. One department might seem like too little, but the Hope only had 2,000 or so

soldiers, so one department was more than sufficient.

Then he needed a Hall of Innovation and Communications. These included government and press secretaries, logistics people. It was called a hall and not a department because it would serve a wide variety of purposes.

Also, not to be forgotten was the Department of Science and Technology that would handle all forms of interactions with the Academy. These included

their supply demands and benefits.

The Department of News and Broadcast would only have one news agency at its center to handle all press-related affairs. This was to prepare for the future when the Hope would have more than one news source.

The Department of Industry to handle all matters related to the Workshop.

The Department of Finance with its jurisdiction of currency and price monitoring...

After ten days of idling, the mining expedition had grown to about a fleet of 240, and its daily salvage easily surpassed the 1,000 ton mark. Furthermore, the radioactive fuel collected thus far was more than enough to support two more space warps...

The time was already late afternoon when Debinou finished his daily sweep of two

residential areas. He still had to sweep the same area again later at night because his job had two shifts. It wasn't a particularly demanding job, but it was highly mind-numbing. However, Debinou was thankful for the job because with the Hope's 20% unemployment rate, he considered himself lucky to still have a job. He understood that he was no longer on Earth, where he had access to his glory and wealth...

Debinou wandered over to his everyday spot to catch up with the rest of the cleaning crew. Reclining on the park bench,

they started sharing their day's affairs. The main topic was how the Hope's mining expedition had been breaking the 1,000 ton mark for the past few days.

This was also a precious time for Debinou to enjoy his daily cigarette... It was an expensive habit, but Debinou still needed time to curb the addiction. Thankfully, his salary still allowed him to enjoy one cigarette each day.

Suddenly, an electromobile stopped in front of them and

two soldiers descended from it. Then they marched towards Debinou's group.

There was palpable nervousness within Debinou's group, but there was no hint of fear because Yao Yuan had trained his men and women well. There had been no reports of military and civilian dispute so far.

The two soldiers gave a deep bow when they reached the group of cleaners. The European soldier proceeded to hand

Debinou a document, saying, "Is it Mr. Debinou? The Major requests your presence at command central at four this afternoon. This document will allow you access into the Barracks." With that, the two soldiers gave another bow, climbed on to the electromobile, and left.

Debinou was too stunned to say a single word through the whole exchange. He came to his senses as people around him urged him to look at the document. It was a simple document with a cut-out of his resume.

However, when Debinou saw the cut-out part, his heart skipped a beat...

It detailed his experience as an ex state economic advisor...

Debinou was incredibly excited, but he calmly bid his leave and sauntered home. Under his family's questioning eyes, he put on the best suit he had and walked over to central command...

At seven that night, Debinou was officially made the Hope's first director for the Department of Finance. His benefits would be similar to that of an intern at the Academy...

It was the twelfth day the Hope had idled near the meteorite cluster when Yao Yuan came across the reports that stated that they had run out of materials to manufacture mining airships. Yao Yuan frowned.

Then, a knock resounded

through central command, and after Yao Yuan issued his permission to enter, a brunette walked in, announcing, “Major, Silewei and the rest of the scientists are here.”

Yao Yuan nodded. “Okay, please let them in.”

After the woman left, about ten scientists barged into the room. Before Yao Yuan could even get his question out, one of the scientists exclaimed excitedly, “Major, we’ve done it! A new energy circuit has been made,

and it has been confirmed to be able to support a much higher voltage at a more stable rate!

“According to our calculations, after the Hope undergoes this update in hardware, it could withstand the maximum output from all three of our nuclear reactors. This means that the amount of load we can bring will be doubled! And there will no longer be risk of explosion and short circuiting!”

Chapter 66: Bon Voyage

After the Academy's deliberation and testing, which lasted ten days, it was finally confirmed that the alloy created by the plants was a type of never-before-seen superconductor; it was a metal that was unfamiliar to man.

If the Hope's energy circuit were updated with this metal, not only would it withstand the output from three nuclear reactors, it would also withstand the added energy from the crystal reactors. Even the total

output compiled from all of these reactors was still way below its support limit.

This solved some of the Hope's biggest problems, which were the risks and negative effects undertaken during warp. Simultaneously, this meant that the Hope could afford to support a greater load during warp.

With this discovery, man's chance of survival in space had made a flying leap. Estimates put the longest man could spend in space without landing at about

ten years, and with a maximum storage of fuel, the number of possible space-warps at about a few hundred times.

Yao Yuan was immensely delighted at the news but calmly, he asked, "How much of these alloys will the plant produce? How much metal do they need to consume to create these alloys? Also, how much of these alloys do we need to upgrade the Hope's energy circuit? Most importantly, how vulnerable will we be during the upgrade?"

The scientists looked at each other blankly before turning to the small group of statisticians that had joined them in the room. The statisticians nodded subtly. They were glad that their leader was astute enough to consider matters such as these.

One of them immediately handed Yao Yuan a report. "Major, regarding your question, the Hall of Communications has collected some data for clarification. First, the issue of alloys... Regretfully, its composition is still unknown, and we have no idea what happens during the plant's

crystallization process. However, based on experiments so far, the plants will create three to four grams of alloy after consuming one ton of asteroid pieces."

The conversion rate had Yao Yuan stunned, and it wasn't hard to see why.

With the Hope's current fleet of 300 mining airships, they charted a harvest of 1,200 to 1,500 tons worth of minerals daily. After removing the waste materials, they were left with

about 50 tons of useful minerals.

The numbers simply wouldn't add up! The plants would exhaust the whole meteorite cluster before they could produce enough alloy to upgrade the Hope!

Noticing Yao Yuan's flummoxed expression, a scientist quickly offered, "Major, you might think that the conversion rate is incredibly stingy, but don't forget that we're in space; there are deposits of minerals literally floating all around us. Even if we

exhaust the several billion tons of minerals that makes up this cluster of meteorites, we still have that forming terrestrial planet to fall back on. The forming planet has asteroid pieces that are bigger than the Hope; just imagine how many minerals it contains!

"Furthermore, the plant has a strong constitution and can spread very fast. If we drop it on one of the big asteroids and let it do its work, we will have more than enough alloy on our hands when it's finished. So please don't worry."

After giving it some thought, Yao Yuan concurred. "Alright, let's move on then. How much of this alloy does the Hope need... Never mind, we can skip that. If we end up with more than enough alloy, then we won't need to worry about that anymore. So the next question is: how safe will we be during the upgrade?"

The statistician who previously spoke answered, "Of course, Major, the report has data on that as well. This is going to be an immense upgrade that will

involve most of the Hope's structure, especially parts that are related to the reactors, so within this period, the Hope can only idle, and of course, it can't commit to space-warping. Regarding the danger, I suspect there will be none coming from within, but from outside... that is an unknown.

"After all, this solar system is a new system, so there might be stray asteroids. If one such asteroid heads towards us while we're in the middle of upgrading, that might be a problem."

An engineer picked up the thread of conversation. "Also, within this period, energy to most of the area within the Hope will be cut off. In fact, the upgrade would be much faster if the Hope's energy was completely shut down."

"A complete shutdown?" Yao Yuan frowned as he addressed the engineer. "But we're in space. Without energy going to life support, all 120000 people on board could die!"

The engineer smiled indulgently as Silewei explained, "Of course, Major, we've thought of that. But if we are to upgrade the Hope section by section, it will take years to finish upgrading a ship of this size. However, if we land on some planet and then transplant parts of the Hope's anti-gravitational system and life support onto that planet, the upgrade would take at most two weeks. In fact, here is the plan that we've drafted.

"We will carve out a temporary underground base, fit it with the necessary systems, and relocate

the people there while work is being done to the Hope. It will take, as I've mentioned, two weeks to upgrade the more important parts of the circuit. Simultaneously, with the Hope safely landed, we can avoid collision with stray asteroids."

After weighing all the possible variables, Yao Yuan asked, "But where would we land in this solar system? The planet isn't fully formed yet. Also, won't the forming planet be prone to geological disasters, like earthquakes, due to its rapid seismic movements?"

"Even though we've mentioned planet, it needn't be one. What we have in mind is the core of the forming terrestrial planet. It has enough mass to make our plan possible. Furthermore, based on our observations, it has about one twelfth of Earth's gravity, and that can only aid our effort. Also, it is still too young to have a layered crust formation, so we needn't be worried about earthquakes.

"Of course, we can't possibly erase the possibility of it colliding with other asteroids

within the cluster, but since they move so slowly, it would take years before any collision would happen. With only a maximum of two months of working period, we will be gone before those disasters occur," explained Silewei.

Yao Yuan dithered over the option. He took a long time before standing up and declaring, "Okay, everyone, the Hope is going to sail towards that forming planet. It will take two months to get there. Within these two months, I want everyone to revise and reevaluate their calculations and

analyses.

"120000 people's lives are on the line here! The margin of error must be kept to its minimum!

"We will depart for the terrestrial planet early tomorrow!"

Chapter 67: Arrival and the House of Representatives

With the Hope's departure from the meteorite cluster, much of the forging and mining had stopped. This meant that quite a large amount of people lost their jobs.

Initially, there were voices of complaints, but those were quickly replaced by another more interesting topic.

The third day after the mass mining was closed down, the Hope's government released a statement saying that they were going to construct a House of Representatives, aiding the people towards self-government. Two hundred representatives were going to be selected from the general public, and there was not going to be any selection requirements...

Even though the details were still unclear, each of the representatives were going to receive a certain degree of benefits, but more importantly, this held weight because it was

the first time the Hope allowed its citizens a part in its administration. Everyone on board raved about this and people wandered the streets asking about the selection process. Was it going to be a voting system or were there going to be exams?

A nervous excitement lingered for almost a month before people got tired of waiting and prompted the government to issue the selection process and rules.

To be fair, it was not Yao Yuan's intention to drag the month out, but there were simply too many things to discuss before the admission for the House of Representatives could be rolled out. Yao Yuan wanted representation of the house to align with the racial and national make-up of the Hope's citizens, but that idea was quickly shot down by experts.

Yao Yuan's rationale was simple: if the Hope had mostly Chinese citizens, wouldn't it be logical that the house had a majority Chinese representation? Of course, this

meant limiting the number of representatives from non-Chinese countries. Therefore, about 50 to 70 seats of the house would be filled by Chinese, and the remaining would be delegated amongst others...

Or at least, that was the plan.

However, that plan was completed dismissed by the experts.

The experts' argument was that since they were now no longer

on Earth but the last human escapees, it was foolish to still insist on segregation between nationality and race. The Hope's government should aim to unite its people, not separate it.

Emotions were high during these exchanges, and at one point, Yao Yuan even pondered, weren't these people afraid that he was going to shoot them and be done with it?

Nevertheless, in the end, the team of experts won out. His discussion with the experts and

interviews with other Black Star Unit members as well as the general public had swayed Yao Yuan to the experts' perspective. He was brought to see that it was the government's duty to introduce assimilation between its people, not segregation.

Nomination for House of Representatives was going the classical way in the sense that voting would be held within each residential tenement to select its own representative...

According to the size of the

tenement, each area would have one to three representatives. The residents would vote for the candidates to represent them in the house. There would be no discrimination for candidacy, so people of all ages, sexes, races, and nationalities could enter.

The voting period would begin on the second month after the Hope left the meteorite cluster.

At the same time, the government released the representatives' job scope and benefits.

Even though its power was still limited, the House would be involved in the administration's general direction, and if necessary, question its actions and decisions.

However, the main role of the House was to be a go-between for the Hope and its people. The House would discuss and debate the public's requests and complaints regarding matters like living and working environment. After that, the House would approach the government with the results of

their debate, and the government would respond to them within seven to fifteen days.

Lastly, the House had the right to amend and reject statutes pertaining to the civil laws.

That was the House's role within the Hope. The public was given rights to self-govern, but those rights wouldn't encroach completely on the Hope's administrative policy. For example, the House had no jurisdiction over issues like

survival of the Hope and of humanity.

Since most of the representatives would still keep their day job, their allowance would see no significant increase, hovering at about 150 H-coins per month. However, for positions like Speaker and Assistant Speaker of the House, their allowance would be about 500 H-coins per month because they had to deal with the daily ins and outs of the House. These roles would be rotated every three years and no one could hold these positions for more than three terms.

Just like that, the two months the Hope spent sailing to the terrestrial planet was suffused with election fervor. There were speeches and rallies happening all over the ship. Benefits aside, the fame of being a representative was incentive enough for most to be wrapped up in this fervor...

The Hope's central mainframe recorded that all of its 120000 citizens had participated in its first democratic process, or at least that was what a future generation found after they

unearthed the mainframe
several centuries later.

And here was the complete record: Eight months after leaving Earth, the Hope's government held its first election for its House of Representatives. Most felt it to be a success and thus had kept it as a tradition, but it was undeniable that there were still parcels of the public that felt they were too oppressed. The freedom that they were granted were mere morsels because the government still held power over most of the administration. It was only after the Hope came

into contact with other alien civilizations and had gone through several space wars that man realized how democratic and free they were...

The conclusion was simple: democracy was indeed a human creation!

After the election for the House was set up, Yao Yuan shifted his attention to other matters. That was, after all, the purpose of the House, to let the people govern for themselves and for him to be relieved of those

responsibilities.

Therefore, by then, he only had his eyes on the Hope's upcoming big upgrade.

This was not only going to be the Hope's first big upgrade, it was going to be mankind's first redesign of a spaceship in space! Furthermore, this was going to be done with 120000 people on board with no planet to land nearby.

It was not an exaggeration to

say that the fate of humanity's last hope hinged on the result of this upgrade. This upgrade was going to decide whether they were going to flourish or perish in space.

Once more, the Academy did not disappoint. Within the two months, they had recalibrated and reassessed their analysis to ensure the upgrade was a success. From the creation of a temporary space base to the transference of the life support system, they had calculated and predicted every problem there was.

Building of the underground base would take about three months to complete. After that, one month would be dedicated to the upgrade. In other words, if there was no change in plans; the whole process would take about four months.

While all this was underway, on a screen in a diagnostics room somewhere, the line that kept track of the solar system's new sun's radioactive and magnetic fields fluctuated. The line twitched for only a second before it returned to normal, so

none of the people in the room
managed to notice it...

Chapter 68: Alien Plant's User Manual

After two months of sailing, the Hope finally reached the forming terrestrial planet.

This meteorite cluster was miles different from the one they were harvesting from previously. Since the previous cluster was a precursor for a gas giant, the overall size of its individual asteroids was small and they were far in between.

This cluster, however, was made up of asteroids of differing sizes. There were some as small as several cubic meters while others were several hundred cubic meters big. In its center, there were a few asteroids that were as big as Earth's moon. They were not uniformly shaped; a result from collision with one another.

The asteroid the Academy selected for landing was the biggest among the bunch. According to calculations of its size and mass, it had about one twelfth of Earth's gravitational force. That force was strong

enough to ensure that the Hope stayed landed. Simultaneously, calculations revealed that the asteroid had a dirt layer, which meant that mining could be conducted on it.

Before landing could be done, there remained a lot of preparations to be completed. Thanks to their experience on Planet Sahara, no one on the Hope was willing to take any more chances. Before the scheduled landing date, more than a handful of surveillance devices were dropped onto the asteroid.

The devices were used to conduct a series of analyses. From its gravity to its magnetism, all sorts of data was collected. Thankfully, all of the results matched the Academy's hypothesis. Thus, on the third day the Hope arrived at the cluster, it started landing.

The landing finished without a hitch. The whole of the Hope breathed a sigh of relief when the giant ship landed softly on the asteroid's surface; some of them even cheered.

In the following days, a rudimentary scouting party was formed. Naturally, it was mostly fitted with military personnel, and a few scientists tagged along. Using a hastily-constructed landing craft, the party departed from the Hope to secure its perimeter and collect some soil and rock samples.

That finished without a problem as well.

What followed was a few days dedicated to analysis...

There were still many wonders waiting to be discovered in space, but one couldn't just jump heedless into it. There were plans to be charted and precautions to be taken. The level of caution was especially heightened when the lives of 120000 people were tied to it.

Six days sped past before the Academy could present its analysis result. The asteroid posed no observable dangers. However, since it didn't have an atmosphere, spacesuits must be worn at all times when one was

outside the base and the Hope. Furthermore, warnings like not to stare directly into the new sun were issued by the government.

On the seventh day after landing, a mining crew was finally dispatched. They had selected a flat land three kilometers away from the Hope as their mining site. Because they were preparing for a base that could accommodate 120000 people, the workload was incredibly heavy.

The idea seemed so implausible that most of the citizens didn't believe it could be done. And there was basis behind their concern. This was, after all, not a construction project on Earth, which could be rushed, and even if it was an earthbound construction, it was still hard to unearth an underground space big enough for 120000 people in three months.

However, these people were clueless to an important detail, a detail that compelled the mining crew to dig a deep hole on the asteroid's surface. The hole's opening was only about ten

meters wide before it expanded in size underground.

Within the Hope, under Yao Yuan's watchful eyes, Ivan was leading his team with an experiment on the alien plant.

Yes, the Whisperer, Ivan, had had a full recovery thanks to the skin transplant futuristic technology. Other than a few scars that were still visible on his face, he had recovered fully from the severe burn. Of course, due to his contribution to the reverse crystallization potion, he

was granted a few more promotions and was now a famed and revered biologist on the Hope.

And Ivan's current experiment represented the most important detail that would allow the dig site to be completed within three months.

The scientists had suggested using the alien plant to speed up the digging process. Since they were going to use it to harvest the mineral ore anyway, this would be killing two birds with

one stone.

"...Okay, I admit that that was beyond my wildest dreams."

That was what Yao Yuan said the day he was presented this proposal. However, he was even more surprised by the Academy's ability to think so outside of the box.

Its crystallization process, harvesting method, and alloy composition, all of these were details that were unknown to

man when they first encountered this plant. However, the Academy had never slackened. Little by little, they had unraveled the mystery behind this engineering marvel. And now they could even engineer the plant to benefit them; it was definitely impressive.

Yao Yuan asked, "Using the plant will indeed speed up the digging process greatly, but you guys have to understand, we still have no full control over these plants. If we allow them to grow wild, they might harm us in the end.

"Although these plants won't directly harm us, they will consume everything in their proximity, and this includes our spacesuits. Do I need to remind you that this asteroid has no atmosphere? Also, what if the plant ends up desertifying the asteroid like it did to Planet Sahara? How will we handle it then?"

To which the group of scientists provided an answer that made them sound less like men and women of science but fantasy novelists.

"Indeed, with the plant's accelerated growth, it might get out of hand easily. Plus, the asteroid's lack of atmosphere does complicate things. It would be hard to manually inject the virus in this environment. So how about we introduce the virus into its system beforehand?"

"Introduce the virus beforehand?" Yao Yuan repeated dumbly.

"Yes, with a prepared virus

capsule. But since these plants are highly sensitive to the virus, it is impossible to introduce it into them the conventional way, as they will wilt almost instantly. But don't worry, because we have come up with a plan...

"There is one thing that the plant won't consume, and that is the energy crystal that it produces. According to our testing, the plant will only reabsorb it into its system.

"Therefore, Major, we are going

to embed a nano-machine into a small energy crystal and let it be absorbed by the plant. The machine will contain a capsule of the plant virus. The machine will be controlled via a remote so that when the time comes, we can use the remote to order the machine to release the virus. In case of interference, the machine could also be timed. After a specified length of time, let's say, three or five days, it can be programmed to automatically break out of the crystal and release the toxin. And then, the plants all over the asteroid will wilt and die!

"That, sir, is our plan to use these plants! In fact, we've found ways to turn these plants into a beneficial tool! From matters of harvesting, mining, energy supplying, and new alloy industry, we are slowly compiling a user manual!

"Yes, Major, our technological level might be laughably low when compared to other alien civilizations, but that is not because we're simple minded, it's just that we lack the necessary experience!

"Man's intellect... will never be overshadowed by any other civilization!"

Chapter 69: Harvest Season

The operation on the plant was successful. As a precaution, the scientists didn't let the plant absorb the crystal naturally but inserted the mechanically-enhanced crystal into the plant's central sac through old-fashioned surgery.

Three separate insertions were done on plant samples of varying growth stages, from the budding shoot, to flowering tendrils. Many plant samples, however, were casualties of

these three successful ones.

Then, the scientists realized that these wilted plant materials were excellent sources of plant fiber. They could be used to create paper, which was especially useful now that the Hope had a news agency.

The Academy was glad that they had stumbled upon such a treasure. They believed that this plant would prove invaluable to their misadventures in space!

The belief had infected even Yao Yuan, who ordered some plant spores to be kept in quarantine so that when man's technology caught up, they could be used in more wonderful ways.

On the other hand, the mining operation had reached its end, which meant that it was time for the alien plant to be used. Of course, they needed to fit the underground hole with surveillance devices before they could release the plant to monitor its growth rate. The devices would be corroded in the process, but those were

necessary sacrifices.

Setting up of the surveillance devices took up yet another long day. After all, this was the first time man had used space technology; they were using a plant for the purpose of harvesting and excavating, so they had to be incredibly cautious. In fact, some parts of the Academy still rejected using this method. They had appealed to Yao Yuan multiple times to give man a few years before they commit to something mankind couldn't understand and handle.

These voices of dissention came from senior scientists, and even though Yao Yuan knew that their points were valid, he believed that man needed to look ahead. For a better chance at survival, they needed a leap in their technological advancement and not a stagnant idling. Yao Yuan felt that using these plants was a step in the right direction.

However, Yao Yuan still had a needling apprehension about the whole operation. In fact, it was not a feeling that was unique to him. He had consulted Zhang Heng, who expressed the same concern. Nevertheless, because

Zhang Heng said that the feeling was more like an annoyance than acute danger, they both decided to keep the matter under wraps.

What mattered the most at the moment was for the upgrade on the Hope be done expediently. This was because if there was any danger, with the upgrade, they could choose to warp without reservation.

After the manual excavation was completed, an acid-covered plant sample was lowered into

the hole. Within, four cameras were monitoring it.

"Releasing energy bait."

"Surveillance system working as normal."

"Initiating heat detection sensors."

"Opening radiography system..."

All of these commands poured towards Yao Yuan, who sat over the whole operation in central command. Finally, every single surveillance device at the Hope's disposal was activated. As an extra safety measure, the Hope even flew 500 meters off the asteroid's surface.

"Now, shed the acidic carapace."

"Captain's order, shedding the acidic carapace..."

In the surveillance video, one could see the covering surrounding the plant blow up into smithereens. However, it was an incredibly contained blast; there was barely any lingering smoke. After that, a ball of green mass slithered to the ground. It then pooled itself in a clump, barely moving.

Everyone watched the video with bated breath, waiting for the alien plant to respond. Gradually the plant mass started to spread out. Other than the globular sac that remained in the center, the rest of the plant fused into searching tendrils.

They latched onto nearby rocks, and before long, the rocks turned to sand. It was obvious that the plant had awakened from hibernation. With an incredible speed, the tendrils crowded towards a corner of the cave. It was reaching for the previously buried energy bait.

After ingesting the bait, the initially 30-cubic-centimeter-wide plant's mass grew to about several hundred cubic centimeters wide. Plus, it showed no signs of slowing down. Almost instantly, it dissolved an amber-colored stalactite the size of a grown

man's fist. Before long, it expanded to ten cubic meters in size.

All this was carefully recorded. Attention was especially paid to the amber-colored rock. After all, its color meant that it probably carried radioactive deposits, and those needed extra analysis.

Just like that, within only a few hours, the hole that was only about several meters wide grew into a cavern that was a few hundred meters in size.

During this process, a lot of air was released by the plant. The scientists had found out that the oxides in the rocks were converted by the plant and released into the air as oxygen and other gases. This was the reason behind Planet Sahara's unique air composition.

The whole project took about seven hours to complete. By then, the plant had grown to a massive size about one hundred meters big, and the cavern was already one thousand meters wide. The harvest would be

allowed to continue if not for the fact that the plant suddenly ate upwards. Therefore, the process had to be halted. With the press of a button, the plant started wilting. In about 10 seconds, all that remained were husks of the plants.

Everyone on the Hope cheered for the success of the operation. A digging expedition that would require months of manual labor was completed within a few hours; it was truly a sight to behold!

After landing once more, a special unit made up of soldiers and scientists went into the cavern. They started to survey the situation, especially the plant's activity. Everything had gone according to plan. All of the plant had died, leaving behind a bunch of fibers, sacs of minerals and alloys, and most surprisingly, an energy plant capsule the size of a ping pong ball!

This meant that they had another energy crystal in their hands!

Although it was only the size of ping pong ball, it contained one tenth of the energy supplied by the Hope's crystal reactors!

Then there were pure minerals of many kinds, such as copper, zinc, aluminum...

There was also a great harvest of alloys. Together with the alloys, whose usage was still unknown, they had harvested about one ton of the superconductor alloy!

The time spent on transporting these materials alone was one full day and one full night.

However, the cavern was not large enough to accommodate 120000 people. Therefore, the excavation would have to continue. Calculations estimated another ten excavations. This meant that harvests of this size would be repeated another ten times!

After these ten harvests, the Hope would no longer need to worry about its stock of metals,

energy crystals, and plant fibers. Other resources, like fertilizers and chemicals, could be transmuted from these, so that meant that the Hope wouldn't need to worry about those anymore either.

The only exception was the radioactive ores and that happened to be the Hope's most urgent necessity. But in a forming solar system, there was bound to be loads of radioactive substances, so it didn't pose much of a worry. With time, the Hope would also have more than enough stores of radioactive supplies.

This had brought a fresh wave of hope to every man on the Hope. Their initial consternation regarding this solar system was immediately wiped out. This system was, in fact, a paradise!

During the second scheduled harvest, a few specialists were looking through the recent computer records on the system's new sun. Suddenly, one of them said, "Hey, come over here and look. There was a spike in the sun's radioactive scale yesterday."

The other specialist replied, without raising his head, "Was it a short fluctuation before everything returned to normal?"

"Yes, you're right," said the surprised specialist.

"Then it's probably fine," offered another person at the end of the room, "That has been happening since two months ago. Our observations showed that the sun has remained overall stable. We've reported this to the Academy, and their

personnel reached the same conclusion after their own analysis. Since every other reading on this sun has remained relatively stable, this was probably a misreading by the device or a result of asteroids colliding with the sun.

"In any case, record it down and report it to the Academy, but most probably they'll tell us that it's nothing again."

With that dismissal, everyone went back to work...

Far away from the Hope, the sun burned quietly, spreading its warm embrace throughout the solar system...

Chapter 70: A Big Development

"There are so many things waiting to be done!"

After the big plant harvest, with the addition of so many supplies, the Hope was over the suggested warp weight limit. In fact, if the Hope were to attempt a warp right now, the fate awaiting it would be instant explosion.

However, these additional

supplies were necessary for survival of the Hope. They would allow the Hope 30 more years of survival in space without the need of another restock. That number was not one to be scoffed at; that was already half of a lifetime.

Therefore, the upgrade on the Hope must be completed to accommodate these extra loads. With an update on the ship's energy circuit, not only could they support these loads, they could also space warp without fear of its dangerous side-effects anymore.

With that goal in mind, after the plants were cleared out of the cavern, architects and engineers started drawing up a layout for the underground base. Within two months, they planned to finish fitting the base with necessary life support systems like an anti-gravitational system, indoor lightning, and an air recycling system.

The whole series of projects was first drafted by experts and architects, then it was discussed by the House of Representatives

before being sent to Yao Yuan to be approved.

The procedures were extremely streamlined. The addition of a Hall of Innovation and Communications had indeed increased the overall efficiency on the Hope. This was because the workers here were all experts in the field, and this included Yao Yuan's new secretary...

Yao Yuan's secretary, a strawberry blonde with a sparkling resume who happened

to also have a voluptuous figure and a penchant for wearing black lace during work had attracted many a meaningful stare from other Black Star Unit members when they came for their appointments with Yao Yuan. Yao Yuan was initially reluctant to hire her due to obvious reasons, but he caved due to her impressive resume. His decision had raised a few suggestive eyebrows within his close circle of friends.

There were five candidates up for the secretary post. Two of them were public servants while the other three were

international companies' secretaries. Before affirming the appointee, Yao Yuan had a face-to-face interview with all five of them.

At the end of the interview, it was obvious that Barbie Isle, who had a mastery of five languages, a sharp mind, broad knowledge, especially in fields of natural science, and who also happened to be a survivor of Virus X, was the best candidate.

The optics aside, Yao Yuan had to choose her for the job. And

his choice was validated because Barbie has proven to be a very capable secretary.

Other than Barbie, other personnel in Hall of Innovation and Communications were experts at their job. As a middleman between Yao Yuan and the rest of the Hope, this hall had made life a lot easier for Yao Yuan. He even had time to enjoy a daily meal at the Barracks' Restaurant and visit the residential tenements once in a while. These were things that he didn't have time to do before.

Nevertheless, with the advent of the new underground base, Yao Yuan returned once more to his busy schedule.

First, there was the engine room proposal for radioactive resources collection. They suggested using radiation detection devices to harvest these deposits instead of the alien plant because the plant would directly ingest the valuable deposits. This meant that collection had to be done manually, the traditional mining way.

Therefore, a mining party had to be formed. It would consist of engineers and technical workers to help transport the yield and soldiers to guard it. Preparations needed to be made for supply lines, spacesuits, gas masks, machinery, etc...

When this workforce was assembling, representatives from the Workshop came with a proposal to build a factory that specialized in manufacturing spare and fine parts...

According to their inventory, the parts they had brought from Earth had been exhausted, especially after constructing the fleet of mining airships.

Even though there were already multiple forges and factories on the Hope, they only handled the manufacturing of factory-scale products. These included furniture, machine parts, automobiles, and the likes. To prevent overload, the fine parts assembly line was jettisoned during departure.

This situation needed to be fixed because the Hope currently had no spare parts available for emergency replacements.

Therefore, the Hall of Innovation and Communication had an emergency meeting to discuss this issue with pertinent engineers and experts, and to draft a budget...

Before this issue would reach a conclusion though, representatives from the Barracks came with their report.

The Barracks wanted to build more shuttles, not the flimsy ones like the mining airships, but ones replicating the Hope's original shuttles, the ones with an anti-gravitational system, a long term homeostatic system, and an engine powerful enough to shoot through a planet's atmosphere.

The Barracks asked for five such shuttles to be built. The reason given was because the Hope needed a dedicated shuttle fleet to handle delicate situations that were too unwieldy for the Hope, situations like incoming meteorite rain and future planet

invasion or defense. Having these shuttles would allow the Barracks to have more tactical options. Furthermore, they wanted the shuttles to be equipped with missiles to increase their combat capability.

Yao Yuan initially thought that the proposal was preposterous, but after giving it some thought, he found that there was validity behind it. Even the Academy said that they were prone to stray asteroids idling outside the cluster, and having a shuttle fleet with missiles would resolve that worry. Plus, who knows what else they might encounter

in the wondrous cosmos...

And so, Yao Yuan launched another meeting with another set of experts. After double-checking the Hope's store of missiles and their combat ability, that proposal was accepted as well, but the five shuttles had been reduced to three...

Right after that, another report came Yao Yuan's way and it was from the agricultural committee...

Ever since the introduction of currency, the citizens' buying capability had seen a tremendous increase. This led to a high demand for food items like meat, eggs, and dairy products, so the Hope was running dangerously low on food. The biomes, with their limited fields of wheat, potatoes, corn, and vegetables, weren't big enough to feed 120000 people.

The report suggested either increase the price for these items or finds a new spot for plantation and farming.

And this new spot suggested by the committee was equally preposterous...

They suggested adding an additional cabin on the seventh level, using the biomes as its foundation.

The Hope's architectural structure was a predesigned marvel that was built to maintain a perfect balance throughout the ship during space travel. It couldn't afford any additional attachments, or the delicate balance could be

destroyed, which would in turn lead to disastrous result.

Therefore, the committee's report came with a solution that would bypass that limitation. They wanted an external cabin because during flight, it would be attached to the biomes but be supported by zero gravity space, so it would not affect the Hope's sense of balance. During landing or warp, the seventh level could be brought within the Hope because the balance wouldn't matter then.

Once more, Yao Yuan was persuaded because the other option would be to introduce a price hike. That would decrease the morale on the Hope and that was totally undesirable.

Therefore, at the end of a long to-do list, construction of an external cabin was added...

Next, a second recruitment was conducted to supply workforce to all of these projects. The wage had increased from the previous 300 H-coins to 400.

The renaissance of the last
human community that
everyone was hoping for
seemingly had arrived...

Chapter 71: A Satisfying Day of Work

"You big liar! I've warned you, stay far away from me!"

About a hundred people could be seen bustling about the radioactive ore mining spot. A few mechanical drillers were employed to dig deeper into the ground. At other sites a few yards away, other crews were busy laying down tracks. Overall, there were more than a thousand workers laboring in the area.

This meant that the Hope's current unemployment rate was at a satisfying zero. The previously overloaded patrol and public service units even had to let some go so that they could be siphoned into these waiting projects.

The mining spot was at a plateau not far away from the Hope. Using detection devices and manual digging, they hoped to gather enough radioactive deposits for the Hope's reactors. Due to this usage of conventional methods, the

whole project needed about five thousand workers. The number was so high because there was a shift rotation to keep 24-hour functionality.

They wanted immediate results, but since the asteroid had no breathable atmosphere and only one twelfth of Earth's gravity, the normal nine to five working hours would exhaust most men. Therefore, the original three shifts per day were expanded to five shifts per day, and that meant a vibrant workforce was required.

The wide scope of the project meant that there were people from all walks of life, nationalities, and language backgrounds. This made multilingual translators a necessity, and one was attached to every few units.

Of course, a respectable amount of military was required to ensure the protection of the people. They were also tasked with guarding the supply lines that were responsible for transporting the mined ores as well as the space-handly compact oxygen canisters which were invented in the year 2023.

Therefore, it was to Xiao Chen's annoyance that the unit she was attached to had her nemesis... the liar, Jay Wales!

Speaking of which, the devilish trickster sidled up to her and grinned mischievously. "But it's my job to stick to you. You're an important asset to us, after all, O great translator. Now, don't be shy; I've read through your resume. You've mastered eight different languages at your young age and are still learning a few more. Now how could I ever let my eyes off important

personnel like yourself...."

Suddenly, Xiao Chen shrilled, "You... you've read my resume?!"

Confused, Jay replied, "Of course.... You're the leading translator of the units I'm attached to. It's only natural for me to go through your..."

Losing her temper, Xiao Chen leaped to give Jay a flying kick. However, she forgot that the asteroid's gravity was much lower than Earth's, so instead of

hitting Jay in his chest, with a scream, she flew over his head instead.

Sighing, Jay grabbed hold of Xiao Chen's calf. Carried by her forward momentum, both of them flew several feet in the air before landing in a heap on the ground.

"Are you crazy? Did you not read the safety protocol? We don't need someone like you to endanger this mission! Either go and memorize the protocols or hand in your resignation!" Jay

roared angrily as he righted himself.

To his surprise and concern, Xiao Chen started crying uncontrollably. After pushing away Jay, who went to help her up, she yelled, "Who the hell do you think you are to lecture me like that?! You're a liar! You have no right to lecture me! Or to read my resume, for that matter! That's a gross violation of my privacy! Get away from me! Go find your blonde girlfriend and leave me alone!"

"Listen to me, you crazy woman..."

The surrounding people smiled as they watched the scene unfold before them. It was oddly grounding to witness something as common as a couple's quarrel in the middle of space. It was a much needed levity in the midst of everything.

At the same time, Jay's friend, Zhang Heng, could be found wolfing down his lunch of bacon fried rice in The Barracks' Restaurant. In between

mouthfuls, he reached for the steamed lobster and stir-fried vegetables that were set before him. A red apple was also present to serve as dessert. It was a luxurious meal, one that the normal working people could only afford twice per month.

Sitting opposite Zhang Heng were Ning Xue and Mao Miao. They smiled inwardly as they sat watching Zhang Heng wolf down his food. After a while, Zhang Heng lifted his head and as if noticing the two girls sitting there for the first time, blushed, and said, "Forgive my

rudeness; I'm just starving after a long day of work."

Both girls shook their heads smilingly, and Ning Xue asked, "If your job is so demanding, why don't you look for something more relaxed?"

Barely containing his pride, Zhang Heng replied, "How is that possible? Among the Homo Evolutis, there are two more confirmed diviners, but their instincts aren't as good as mine; their prediction works only half the time. They need me down

there in the cave. It's dug by plants after all, so who knows whether it'll cave in or not. My power is indispensable. Only I can tell accurately whether there is a danger of cave-ins. I barely have time to do anything else!"

There was a hint of bravado and confidence behind his voice as Zhang Heng lamented his busy schedule.

Both girls picked up on that, and it hit them right there that the mewling boy they had once nursed in their laps had

blossomed into a full grown man. A mix of attraction and regret suffused their racing hearts.

Suddenly embarrassed by his sanctimonious speech, Zhang Heng abashedly scratched his head. "Okay, that's enough about me. How about you two? How's school?"

"It's the same as usual, but at least we have an interesting new professor this semester. He has been griping about how the Hope's government has

forgotten about the Department of Education, and how that will be the humanity's downfall. Hearing him speak, you would think he should have gone to the Major with his demands already..." pouted the two girls.

After that, the party of three segued into other topics. With a similar familial background and age, the topics between them were practically endless.

At the other end of the restaurant, a few middle-aged men and seven or eight

youngsters made up a strange table of friends. A sense of joy was shared as they ate their meals and sipped their beers.

A Caucasian, middle-aged, firmly-built man burped after he downed his beer. "Now this is the life! To have your family waiting with a warm meal and cold beer after a satisfying long day of work. The picture would be complete if there was a free movie or television show."

This unlikely mix of friends was workers that had just been

released from their work shift. They had just returned from the asteroid to the Hope. To celebrate the increase in their allowance and new friendships, they unanimously agreed to splurge for a night out at the Hope's best eatery. Enjoying both beers and cigarettes that most had not touched in a long time, blissful satisfaction was written plainly on their faces.

"500 H-coins per month and provision of luxury items like alcohol and cigarettes during breaks, now this is indeed the life," sighed a young man satisfactorily.

After taking another long drag of his cigarette, the Caucasian man continued, "Now, I'm going to let you guys in on a secret that only we technicians know. Based on the data we've collected so far, the Hope has hit the motherload this time! Did you know that the scans showed that the meteorite cluster and this solar system in general contain more mineral deposits than our own star system? Before long, the Hope will have to expand into more projects and job scopes! I'm not ashamed to admit that prior to this, I would wake up scared s**tless in the middle of the night...

"We were too helpless, too lonely, too isolated in the vast cosmos. I didn't believe we had what it takes to survive in space. But after locating this system, my view has changed. The Hope itself has changed as well. Things are so much better now, people are better taken care of, and benefits are better, even the food's better..." The man pointed jokingly at the empty plate before him before continuing after another drag of smoke. "I have a six-year-old son. I was so afraid for him, afraid that he will not have the chance to even begin his life before tragedy hits this ship. But now that fear has

dispersed like smoke. I pray to God that the Hope will keep up this busy schedule...

"This proves that we humans can not only survive but also flourish in space...

"That is my firmest belief!"

Chapter 72: Moving In

It took two months and 29 days to completely furbish the underground base with necessary life support.

The temporary base was separated into three levels. The top level, also the biggest level, was designated as residential area. It could accommodate up to 80,000 people. Other than that, this level was also where amenities like communal cafeterias and bathrooms could be found.

The middle level was also going to be a residential area. It could accommodate 50,000 people. The combination of these two levels could house most if not all of the Hope's general citizens.

The last level was the industrial area. All assembly lines that were constructed in the past two months were here. Production of spare parts, technological goods, the three shuttles, as well as the external cabin were this floor's responsibility.

Although temporary, the base was responsible for the lives of 120,000 people. If it were to fall, it would handily wipe out humanity's last hope.

Therefore, multiple stages of detailed vetting and testing were necessary before the government would allow the public to move in. There was no margin for error. Yao Yuan even threatened execution for those found guilty of mishap. He didn't think his threat was over the line, because the lives of many outweighed the lives of the few!

However, because the failure of this project would harm the families of these engineers, technicians, and general workers, Yao Yuan's threat was excessive.

In fact, the project was originally completed in two months. The multiples stages of quality control had dragged it to two months and 29 days.

The period of quality control was so endless that it even had Yao Yuan antsy and worried.

After a final tweaking had been done to a spot of water piping that had been found to be faulty, the underground base was finally cleared for lodging.

By then, the Hope had left Earth for over 11 months. According to the Hope Calendar, they were about 15 days away from the Hope's first New Year. It was a historical moment not only because mankind had spent a whole year in space, but also because that year was incredibly tumultuous. Frankly, no one expected they would last this long!

It was truly inspiring to realize how far they had come since then. They now had enough materials and energy to last another 30 more years in space. The harvesting of radioactive deposits for the past two months also ensured the Hope 370 more space-warps!

Furthermore, within the piles of radioactive deposits, the Academy had discovered many unfamiliar radioactive isotopes. They were naturally-occurring elements that were previously unknown to man. Their rarity

could be credited to their incredibly short half-lives. The Academy needed to do more testing before their uses could be known.

However, it was undeniable that they had their own specific uses. Maybe they could be used in the future to build radioactive weapons. Hence, the Hope decided to keep a store of them in their mineral form.

The bountiful harvest, the zero unemployment rate, and the increase in wages kept the

Hope's overall spirit at an all-time high. To keep the high morale going, Yao Yuan ensured the supply of luxury items be kept constant by expanding the biomes to include coffee, hops, and tobacco fields. There was even an added pool to rear seafood like lobsters and crabs.

An atmosphere of glee suffused the Hope for the past three months. It was the first time there was such an overt showcase of joy and happiness since they left Earth. It was a joy that was that much sweeter because it appeared that they were slowly climbing out of rock

bottom.

"Attention. Please make sure your spacesuit is correctly equipped before stepping out of the Hope. Ensure that all the clasps and zips are secure. Please follow all of the safety protocols during transportation. Do not take too big of a step, do not use excessive force, stay close to your assigned partner, and do not stray away from your group. Attention..."

There was a vacuum sanitation chamber near the ship's

entrance. Everyone had to go through it before they could step out into open space. With its 10 doors, each cycle allowed 100 people to go through at once. About 1,500 people would pass through every 30 minutes.

It was finally time for migration from the ship to the base. From its 120,000 citizens, there were about 70,000 women and children that hadn't been exposed to open space since they boarded the Hope. Therefore, the government had to handle the transfer delicately. To ensure a stable level of efficiency and safety, every group of 1,500

people that left the Hope was assigned a troop of 300 soldiers.

Even before leaving the Hope, there were talks, rehearsals, and simulations of safety protocols to guarantee a safe transfer. The government had done all it could to provide maximum protection.

The Academy and the Workshop went as far as engineering and building a space bus to transfer babies and toddlers. This was because they were too small to fit into the available spacesuits. The bus

could run for eight hours, perfect for short-distance trips like these.

The migration took about three days and three nights. It took such a short time because supplies like water, oxygen tanks, food, and tents were transported beforehand. Later, people could claim these by presenting their ID cards.

After three days, there were still a few technicians and soldiers that remained on the Hope. They were responsible for

maintenance of the biomes and overall security.

Yao Yuan also moved into the base, while maintaining a line of communication with the Hope. Many jobs awaited him in the base, like overseeing the reports of the ongoing radioactive ore mining, the running of the industrial level, and arrangement of settlement within the public. In fact, his workload had increased manifold since the move.

Six days after they settled into

the base, the Black Star Unit members that were in their downtime, accompanied by Jay, approached Yao Yuan in his office, attempting a proposal.

"A New Year party? Campfire party? And events like... Movie screenings? Transformers 7, Spider 8..."

As Yao Yuan listened to his teammates rattle off their ideas, it finally dawned on him that the Hope's New Year was coming in a few days' time...

"We can have a New Year party but not a campfire. For one, there is no spare fuel, for another, what about the lingering smoke? However, the idea of classic movie screening is not bad. We can sequester some strategic spots for that purpose and... the choice of films can be decided through voting. But no adult films. Wa Luo, wipe that lascivious smile off your face, don't think I don't know about the files you have in your hard drive. Those are exactly the films that we can't be showing."

The more Yao Yuan thought about it, the more he realized

how warranted the party was. First, it could raise morale; second, it would ease the public's anxiety; and third, didn't they deserve a party? Everyone had suffered through so much to finally reach a stage where people could legitimately lay back and relax. Wasn't that worth celebrating?

Yao Yuan's approval was met with a resounding cheer. A cheer that was joined in by the rest of the Hall of Communications, and his secretary, Barbie, smiled gratefully at him.

The group went whistling happily out of Yao Yuan's office, and even long after they had left, the sense of joy lingered in the room.

"If there is a God, I pray to thee to keep us safe, to make sure this joy continues year after year. Give us strength to push forward, to find mankind a new home."

Yao Yuan silently prayed before shaking his head and laughing at the absurdity of his actions. After that, he picked up the rest

of the reports to review...

Then, it was New Year.

Chapter 73: The New Year Party

News about the New Year party and movie screening spread among the Hope's citizens like wildfire. People weren't expecting much from the government due to their busy schedule, but to have such a momentous date marked with a big celebration was a joyous comfort.

Of course this meant that the authority had more things on their plate. Personnel who were still stationed on the Hope and

workers on the radioactive mining sites as well as the industrial level were going to return to the base's residential area to join in on the celebration. Plans had to be made to tighten the security and to maintain order. Shifts would have to be introduced so that the guards themselves could take a breath and join in the fun.

However, what's a party without food? And for a celebration this size, the amount of food they needed to prepare was ginormous.

But a promise is a promise. The authority wasted no resources preparing delicious meals and luxuries like cigarettes, candies, fruits, and wines. Nevertheless, it was all done within Yao Yuan's stipulated limit. Their emergency stockpile of food was not to be touched. They were already using every single acre of fertile land of the biomes. This precious stockpile needed to be kept untouched in case of emergency.

Even so, the amount of resources used to make this party a success was not something to be brushed off, but

Yao Yuan felt that it was permissible because the completion of the external cabin would help restock these resources quite easily. After weighing all the options, Yao Yuan finally resolved to approve the request to pretty much empty their stored food items. Following that, he also started recruiting experienced chefs.

However, a party is not just food; there needs to be conversations and events. The issue of language barrier then stood in the way of this.

So, Yao Yuan lost himself in another busy week preparing for the party...

While dragging a grumpy Ren Tao to the canteen, Chou Yue grumbled, "Would you stop giving me that sad face, Ren Tao? So I woke you up from your sleep, what's the big deal? You could do the same to me next time.... Alright, listen up because I have a serious question for you. Do you think I should join the audition? Humble brag, I do know a lot of pop songs."

Ren Tao scratched behind his ears uninterestedly. "You, singing? Please, you'll only scar the audience. Think of the senior scientists and technicians who will be joining this party; I don't think their hearts could withstand your singing. I don't think your status as a pseudo-diviner could excuse you from a mass murder of that scale."

Chou Yue smacked the back of Ren Yao's head angrily, yelling, "If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything! That's a life lesson for you. Plus, it's you who can't appreciate my unique tone. But fine, I won't be

auditioning. Happy now? And so what if I'm a pseudo-diviner? It's still better than you, who isn't part of the Homo Evolutis elite! After I've mastered this power, maybe they'll even give me a military post, maybe one like Zhang Heng's. You'll really feel sorry then!"

Ren Tao only smiled blankly in return. In his mind though, he was actively rearranging all his observations from the past few months.

The Homo Evolutis his sister

had just quoted was the group of people who survived Virus X. To his knowledge, this group of people acquired superhuman powers after the ordeal. An example was the diviner like his sister. She could predict danger, or as he saw it, it was a heightened sixth sense. Research on sixth sense had been around for quite some time, and although there had been no conclusive proof, experts agreed that such an attuned sense does exist in some people.

The most powerful diviner on the Hope was the famous Zhang Heng. His power was so focused

and trained that his was more than a mere sixth sense; it could legitimately be called a superpower.

Other Homo Evolutis included the likes of researchers, Ivan and Bo Li. They were The Whisperers. According to hearsay going around the ship, the pair had been responsible for solving many scientific conundrums facing the Hope ever since their powers had been discovered. They were even named the future Newton and Einstein by people of the Hope.

(Now that I think about it, my powers do seem awfully similar to the Whisperer. But instead of hearing voices, clues, logical deduction, and reduction come easily to me. Maybe I should give myself a cool superhero name as well... Hmm... How about the Thinker?)

While Ren Tao got lost in his thoughts, Chou Yue, who was still fuming, stormed ahead. After a while though, she felt something was off. The sense of weight she was supposed to be dragging disappeared. After turning around, she realized that she had been holding on to

the limp sleeves of her brother's jacket, and the body that was attached to it had completely vanished...

On the other hand, Ren Tao in his undershirt found himself five feet in the air, hanging on to the side of a sturdy tent pole after unconsciously clambering up it...

The New Year party was a great success. The people who got through the audition presented a hilarious and varied series of performances. Naturally, these

weren't professionals, but that only added to the sense of camaraderie surrounding the party.

The party came with a quotaed buffet. Luxuries like seafood, cigarettes, alcohol, and truffles were limited to few servings per individual, but bases like noodles, rice, soup, and potatoes were unlimited.

Served with delicious food, surrounded by a joyous crowd, and serenaded by musical performances, for many, it felt

like a regular night off back on Earth...

Reminiscing about the journey they had taken since then, many surreptitiously wiped away their stray tears...

They had spent hours, days, weeks, and even months worried about personal safety when they first left Earth, when they landed on Planet Sahara, and when they ended up trapped in the nebula. It was, for many, a touching and inspiring moment.

Right then, Ning Xue, who gave a beautiful rendition of a melodious pop song, concluded her performance and left the stage. The next person to ascend the stage was a 17-year-old Asian girl. With a head of lustrous hair shimmering like black silk, she was a beauty with her toothed smile and pearly skin.

But what truly grabbed everyone's attention was the fact that the girl was wearing a traditional Han costume. Like a lady who came out of a Chinese period drama, her outfit added a sense of class and dignity to her beauty. As she readied for her

performance, everyone started to quiet down.

With the host's aid, she laid down a **GuZheng** on the table before her. Then she proceeded to mesmerize the audience with a haunting string musical...

"**Starry, starry night**, a world shining in pearly haze, do you remember our carefree days, a world that we have loved deeply so...

"But we were forced to go, to a

world that is unknown still, a
cosmos blowing with its winter
chills, an empty, empty land...

"Now strong and proud we
stand, for hope spoke to you and
me...

"How strong this hope has
made us be. It said we'll again be
happy. No matter the distance,
no matter how. In fact, I can see
it now... Starry, starry night..."

From the song's rough edges, it
was obvious that the song was

an original and the girl didn't have much experience performing in public. It was highly possible that she wrote the song herself.

However, everyone present was moved by the lyrics and melody of the song. From the devastation of losing a home planet, the excitement in the prospect of progress, and hope for the future, it was as if they were reliving these moments vicariously through her song!

It was a magical and

indescribable experience. It was as if the audience was charmed by the girl's performance and they could share her emotions, feelings, and her soul through her song.

Homo Evolutis like Yao Yuan, Zhang Heng, Jay, Ren Tao, Chou Yue, Xiao Chen, even Xiao Niao, Qiu Qiu, and Dan Dan in the crowd though shared surprised and cryptic expressions.

They saw something of themselves in the girl. During the performance, they felt like

the girl was communicating personally with them on a spiritual level through her song.

Yao Yuan quickly waved for his secretary to bring him the files on the girl.

"Nian Xi Kong, so you're one of the Homo Evolutis, and one whose power hasn't been discovered...

"The ability to effectively communicate feelings and emotions on a spiritual level...

An **Anima**?"

A Chinese string instrument

Translation of the lyrics is
roughly modeled after the song,
Vincent

Greek term for soul

Chapter 74: Solar Wave

The sense of joy slowly dispersed following the conclusion of the New Year party, but a fostered sense of faith and conviction had lingered within the people long after the last light of the party was switched off.

Scratching his head, Yao Yuan mumbled, "Hmm, this is troublesome. We burned through so much of our food stockpile, huh?"

"But Major, if you look at it from another perspective, the fact that we are running low on resources is a good phenomenon," offered Barbie, who stood beside him.

Yao Yuan looked curiously at his secretary. "How so? We might be facing a situation where people will have to starve. How is that a good phenomenon?"

In her tight skirt and figure-hugging black suit, Barbie was a gorgeous beauty with her pair of

chilling blue eyes and olive skin.

She smiled. "With all due respect, Major, you've got to open your eyes to other possibilities. History has shown repeatedly that paucity of resources doesn't necessarily lead to collapse. With the necessary programs in place, it could even inspire progress in production and economy. Some people work well under pressure."

After some rumination, Yao Yuan replied, "So you believe

that releasing information on this shortage and the fact that the government is actively building an external cabin to counteract this problem will inspire a resurgence of faith in the people? Because it shows that the government cares about the public enough to share its crisis with them, and also that it's capable of resolving those issues?"

"Yes, I do believe so. Major, you have been viewing the government and its public as two separate and opposite entities. I'm not saying that it's wrong, because a line does need

to be drawn within the two, but it serves us no good to completely alienate the public in the government's decisions. By involving the people, it'll foster a feeling of loyalty and responsibility..." Barbie offered with a sweet smile.

Finally, Yao Yuan concurred, "Yes, I can see the point of your argument. If it doesn't involve something crucial like military regimes and governmental restructuring, we should be inviting the public to join in the conversation.... Barbie, if you find me with such lapses in judgments again, please kindly

remind me to correct my erroneous ways."

Barbie chuckled coquettishly. "Wouldn't that be inappropriate, Major?"

That was the reason why Yao Yuan was initially reluctant to hire Barbie. He knew rumors would start flying around the Hope. The fact that his own Black Star Unit members started looking at him slyly had proven him right. Thus, faced with Barbie's slightly flirtatious remarks, Yao Yuan could only

smile awkwardly in return.

A few days later, when the news of food shortage broke, it was as how Barbie expected; no one began pointing fingers. Many even approached Yao Yuan to volunteer for more shifts.

Things were right on track...

The projects resumed after the New Year party. The crews continued upgrading the Hope's energy circuits.

The first level that underwent the upgrade was the sixth level biomes. It was the most difficult level to upgrade because it housed many plants and animals. The energy couldn't be completely shut down, for it would harm these creatures, and there was no other empty space available to temporarily move the plants and animals to. Therefore, the upgrade had to be carried out section by section. It was incredibly time-consuming, and the upgrade of the biomes alone took up the bulk of the stipulated schedule.

Thankfully, the upgrade went without a hitch. After that, they moved on to upgrade the circuits around the three nuclear reactors. To facilitate that, they had to shut down all energy that was connected throughout the Hope. The only exception was the biomes. In other word, if the Hope was to come into contact with any form of danger then, it would be doomed.

Due to that reason, Yao Yuan ordered a team comprising of a newly built shuttle and their remaining shuttle to patrol around The Hope during that vulnerable period. The shuttles

were upgraded to have at least minimal combat capability so that they could provide firepower in case it was needed.

This upgrade took either to ten days. They had to be extra cautious because this modification corresponded to the Hope's stability and functionalities during warp.

The crew worked tirelessly to finish this important circuit upgrade. Finally, the upgrade was completed, and what followed were upgrades of other

miscellaneous electrical parts, which would take about another half a month.

With the completion of the main energy circuit's upgrade, the Hope's central mainframe, alongside its rudimentary surveillance system, came back online. With its radar in place, at least now the Hope would know of and could prepare for impending danger, and with that, many breathed a sigh of relief.

The day after that, the Hope's

scanning and detection system had been restored to its full capacity. Two technicians started their day going through the routine checks. They chatted jokingly about their days until one of them froze silently before a printer. After retrieving the printed report with a shaking hand, he yelled, "Quick! Send this report to the Academy, which is now stationed at the underground base!"

The report featured wildly fluctuating graphs. It was a report that documented the sun's radiation level, electromagnetic waves, and

photon levels, and it revealed a startling truth...

The newborn sun of the system was undergoing an unknown but immense change!

A catastrophic change!

And quite possibly an explosive change...

"No! It can't be an explosion! After a sun is formed, it is

already fairly stable. The only time it would be unstable would be when it reaches its final stage, where its inner cloud of hydrogen becomes transmuted into helium and reacts with other elements to form compounds. We would see a fluctuation in its star body then! Of course, before then, if a high velocity asteroid with a heightened photon level flew into the sun, it would create a disaster on a catastrophic scale, but there is nothing in our system thus far that suggests that would happen in this solar system!"

Within just 30 minutes, all the relevant scientists gathered in the second level field when news of the report reached the underground base. They were joined by the Black Star Unit and all other known Homo Evolutis, and this included their newest addition, Xi Kong.

The person on stage now was the famed astrophysicist, Alan Watts. After reviewing the data, he was debunking the theory of galactic explosion espoused by a physicist that spoke before him.

He said solemnly, "As everyone here knows, this is a new solar system we've found ourselves in. The star is brand new, filled with various unknown hydrogen composites. It is too young to cause any explosive reactions. Of course, we can't rule out periodic fluctuations of a new sun, but those fluctuations occur every few hundred million years; is it even possible for the star to have aged so much within the time we've been here?"

While listening to Alan's explanation, Yao Yuan was reviewing the reports that were handed to him. Reports on the

sun then and reports on it ten days ago seemed to correspond to two entirely different cosmic entities! The differences between the data were so obvious that it was not lost on a non-scientist like Yao Yuan.

While pressing the voice button on his chest, Yao Yuan interrupted, "Sorry, Professor Alan, as the person responsible for the last survivors of humanity, I don't need a class on astronomy at the moment. I just have two questions that I need answered...

"What exactly is happening to this star, and how is it going to affect our situation?!"

Alan nodded firmly before addressing the crowd. "Within the half an hour of receiving this report, the astrophysics committee has had an emergency meeting. The most possible hypothesis we've come up with is that the star is beginning its transformation from a protostar to a main sequence star.

"Since this is the first time we

are witnessing this transformation in person, I can't guarantee what will happen. The best I could provide is based off of simulations done by the National Observatory...

"The star will undergo a limited expansion before exploding in a wave of radiation and electromagnetic currents. Whether or not that will affect us directly...

"...I have to say, the answer is most likely. During this transformation, the star's

seismic changes will increase the overall activity of the asteroids in the system, because formation of a main sequence star would incite a quicker development of planets to complete the solar system..."

Right then, everyone felt a tremor shake the room. The force toppled several people off their feet. After that, lights on the walls and ceiling started blinking before going off completely, and cracks started forming on the cave walls...

Was it an earthquake?

Or hints of something else...

Chapter 75: The Collapse

The tremors lasted for three to five minutes. The room shook violently in the first few minutes before petering off.

People started collecting themselves when some of the lights came back on.

The second level they were in was in total shambles. There were multiple cave-ins, and wall installments littered the floor in

pieces. Simple constructions collapsed under the pressure, and most worryingly, cracks began appearing on the floor.

This was not the cave's natural flooring. It was reinforced cement flooring that had passed stringent quality control. The fact that it started cracking was an alarming testament to how strong the earthquake was.

When debris fell from the cave ceiling, Yao Yuan was unfortunately hit on his head by one of the bigger pieces.

Trapped in a throng of panicked crowd, even though he could sense the danger, he couldn't timely avoid it. The concussion knocked him out cold for several minutes. Even as people around him started rousing themselves, Yao Yuan was still drifting in and out of consciousness.

His Black Star Unit members were the first to notice the blood streaming down Yao Yuan's forehead. Lifting his leader and friend up into a seated position, Ebon yelled for medical attention. "Doctor! We need a doctor here! Liu Bai! Where in the world are you? Get over

here!"

Hearing his name, Liu Bai quickly rushed to Yao Yuan's side, uttering hurriedly, "Ebon, would you stop with the yelling! It's not helping the situation.... Let me see.... Thankfully it's just blood. Damn, I don't have my medical kit on me. And people, move out of the way, you're blocking the light!" He then proceeded to take Yao Yuan's pulse and check his iris for eye movement.

Ebon seemed ready to scream

something else but was stopped by a firm pat on his shoulder. He turned to meet Ying's piercing glare. "Didn't you hear what Liu Bai just said? Move out of the way, you're blocking the light!"

Ebon swallowed his retort and sluggishly moved his giant body out of the way, but his eyes remained firmly fixed on Yao Yuan.

By then, Yao Yuan was gradually regaining his sensibility. However, in reality, even though he was

unconscious, he could sense clearly what was happening around him. He just couldn't seem to command his body. As he woke up, he shook his head at Liu Bai, signaling that he was fine, carried himself up with his friends' help, and surveyed the surroundings.

The devastation aside, Yao Yuan also frowned at the group of scientists that was in the room with them when tragedy hit. About 10 of them were also victims of falling debris, and some were still unconscious. Most soldiers and Homo Evolutis also suffered light abrasions. It

was, in one word, chaotic.

"Ying, bring Zhang Heng and a small unit to check on whether the ceiling of the first floor has opened to space. This is most important, so go now," Yao Yuan issued.

Ying saluted, wrangled up seven trained men, and marched towards the first floor.

Without missing a beat, Yao Yuan turned to Liu Bai. "Liu Bai, I want you to head another team

to take care of all the wounded. Record any and all deaths and serious injuries. I will send extra medical supplies and personnel to join you in about 10 minutes."

Liu Bai saluted and then quickly led his team to the group of scientists. He understood what was left unsaid in Yao Yuan's orders. It seemed cruel, but the lives of these scientists were the most important, even more important than the Homo Evolutis...

"Ol' Wong, and the rest of Black

Star Unit, your job is the heaviest of all. I want you to gather all the remaining soldiers and escort the civilians on this floor up to the first floor.

"This quake came too suddenly, so the people must have been spooked. I want you to go up there and maintain order. Ol' Wong, I give you the power to terminate any and all dissidents that attempt to foment ensuing chaos. Show them no mercy! And this includes executing any resisting military, public servants, or sc... scientists!"

Yao Yuan gritted out his last few syllables. The sense of dread and rancor in his order was so acute that it had Jay, who stood several feet away, shivering.

With a grim façade, Guang Zhen saluted his leader. He then turned to gather the rest of his team members and moved to complete his assigned mission objective. Instead of moving towards the residential areas though, his team first made their way to the direction of the arms storage area.

Yao Yuan silently nodded his head. He had full faith in his second-in-command, and he knew that this important mission was left in capable hands. Then he turned towards the group of Homo Evolutis.

"Follow and keep up with Lieutenant Wong's team. You'll be safest with him, so please move," Yao Yuan advised them.

Yao Yuan tried to keep his words light, but his intonation betrayed the severity of the situation. They knew that

refusing this order would result in disciplinary action and possibly execution. So they nodded obediently and waited for Guang Zhen's team to return.

Jay made to join this group, but Yao Yuan grabbed him by his shoulder and said, "Jay, you're with me!" With that, Yao Yuan sprinted towards a long corridor.

After a slight hesitation, Jay ran to catch up with Yao Yuan. In between breaths of air, he

asked, "Hasn't everything been properly assigned? What else is there for us to do?"

"The third level..."

Yao Yuan continued with much difficulty, "I've been hearing voices coming from the first floor ever since the quake. This means that there's probably chaos up there, but it also meant that the passageways between our level and theirs are clear enough to allow the sound waves to pass through. But the third floor... There is supposed

to be at least 3,000 workers and 200 soldiers stationed there. There're several industrial machines as well, but I haven't heard a peep coming from the third floor.... I fear... The passageway to the third level has completely collapsed."

Jay recovered from his shock and asked hurriedly, "Does this mean that the third floor itself has collapsed... But what about all those people in there? It's impossible that they're all dead, right?"

"I have faith in the experts' analysis of the base's structural integrity. Their environmental report says that the base could withstand up to magnitude 9 earthquake, so this small tremor should do it no harm. The level itself should be safe, but it's the getting there that I'm worried about.... Anyway, let's go take a look first," Yao Yuan added.

Jay went silent to digest the information. After a moment, he asked carefully, "But why didn't you pick one of the Black Stars to join you? I don't have Zhang Heng's divining ability nor the others' weapon skills. Are you

expecting me to dig the passageway with my bare hands, or intend to use me as a meat shield?"

Yao Yuan turned to face Jay and looked him in the eye, saying, "Jay, you are part of the military and a reserved member of the Black Star Unit now. Remember that you belong to this 'others' you speak of... In any case, I had a fit of inspiration to bring you along. It was as if something was telling me that the lives of these 120,000 people will depend on you..."

Shocked by the revelation, Jay quickly added, "Don't tell me the shuttle's nuclear missiles stockpile are on the third floor! I'm not a hacker or bomb diffusion expert, I can't handle those!"

Yao Yuan laughed bitterly, "No, it's something worse..."

"Something worse? What could be worse than bombs?" questioned Jay incredulously.

"...The alien plant!

"The energy of this base is supplied by the three crystal reactors situated on the third floor. According to protocol, the acid and potion bath has to be recycled every eight hours to ensure that the output of the plant remains constant...

"If the way to third floor really has collapsed, it will be impossible for us to dig our way through in under eight hours. This is because we have to take care of the majority first. This means assigning most of the workforce to the top two levels

to ensure order and security...

"Only after that can resources be relegated to opening the pathway to the industrial floor. Do you know what this means? We'll need at least 18 to 24 hours to clear the pathway, but currently there are only two changes of potion available down there, because all the potion stock was stored on the second floor..."

Yao Yuan swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat, adding, "This means we might

be losing power to this base soon. Do you know how long man can survive in space without the support of the life preservation system? The most is 30 minutes!

"I could send the people on the first two floors back onto the Hope, but Jay, what about the people down there?!"

In an uncharacteristically fragile moment, Yao Yuan pleaded with tears in his eyes, "There are at least 3,000 people down there, Jay. Do you hear

me, 3,000 people! These are people that we've shared tears, laughter, and sweat with; you want me to sit idly and give them up?! I'm sorry, but I can't!

"So, Jay, please, I beg of you. Please listen to my desperate and only plea...

"Use your mental manipulation power! Trick the plants into believing the potion has been changed even though it hasn't! Please!"

Chapter 76: 24 Hours (1)

When Jay and Yao Yuan arrived at the pathway leading to the third floor, they were distraught to realize that it had indeed collapsed. The collapse was so complete that there wasn't space for a rat to squeeze through, much less a full grown man.

After an uncomfortable moment of disbelief and stunned silence, Yao Yuan met Jay's eyes and said, "There's no other way now. Get closer to the rocks and try to focus on the plant's presence. You don't need to use

your power yet, just try to clear your mind. There are still two changes of potion available down there, so I believe we're safe for the next 20 hours."

After a pause, Yao Yuan added, "Jay, you stay here. I need to go meet up with the rest to come up with a plan. But trust me. I'll be back as soon as possible."

After hearing that, Jay panicked. "Wait, Yao Yuan! I can't focus with all that's going on around us. Plus, I have no idea how I obtained this power

in the first place; how do you expect me to switch it on just like that?! It's pointless for me to stay here, so how about I follow you up there and we'll come back here together in 20 hours?"

Grabbing Jay by his shoulder, Yao Yuan sternly said, "No! You have to stay here. 20 hours is my rough estimate because the limit the experts gave me was 16 hours. The difference will depend on the concentration of the potion currently used in the reactor.... Also, Jay, Xiao Chen is down there. She applied for the post of translator for the technicians so she could avoid

you!"

Jay was flabbergasted by the news and Yao Yuan took that opportunity to leave. After a long while, Jay lifted his hand at the direction Yao Yuan ran off to. As if finally noticing that Yao Yuan was no longer there, Jay slid passively down to the floor, mumbling, "What does he mean by trying to focus on the presence of the plant? Does he really think I'm Superman? Why does he trust me when I don't even trust myself..."

That bastard!"

On the other hand, the team led by Ying had reached the entrance to the first floor. They breathed a sigh of relief after finishing a cursory survey. Even though there were a few pieces of falling debris and widening cracks, because it was the underground base's main entrance, the place had escaped the quake practically unscathed. Most of the machines were functioning normally and the quarantine room was still in one piece. Thankfully, there was no air leakage.

Ying couldn't help but be impressed by the Workshop's craftsmanship. They must have spent days designing and building this entrance. This confirmed Ying's initial evaluation of this entrance when they first moved into the base. Based on his sniper experience, he believed it would require at least a tactical missile to break down this door.

Then, Ying turned to address his team. "Everyone spread out to secure the perimeter. Zhang Heng, are you getting anything

with your divining power...
Zhang Heng?"

Ying turned to the direction he thought his teammate was standing and saw a blanched Zhang Heng. He quickly rushed to Zhang Heng's side to keep him from falling. "Zhang Heng, what's wrong? You've sensed danger, haven't you?! Tell me!"

Zhang Heng swallowed nervously and replied in a wisp of a voice, "The door itself is fine... but the concrete foundation connecting it to the

cave wall is loosening. I have no clue how much longer the entrance will stand, but it has been sending me waves of warning ever since we stepped into this area."

Ying took in a breath and nodded slightly at Zhang Heng without uttering a word in return. Then he sat firmly down on the floor, looking resolutely at the entrance door.

Ever since the Hope left the confines of Earth, many of its citizens had been working hard,

brushing up on their knowledge about space. For example, they knew that instead of ballooning up and bursting in an explosion like how it was commonly portrayed in movies, man would die of asphyxiation if left in space without support.

That was the danger they would face if the door was to fall. If the foundation continued to loosen, the difference in air pressure inside and outside the base would create a powerful pressure vortex. A small crack in the foundation would lead to the entrance being completely ruined.... That would certainly

spell doom for the 120,000 people within.

Speaking of the people within, when Ying's team was rushing to the first floor entrance, they had witnessed chaotic outbreaks among the people. There weren't any cases as serious as robberies or murders for now, but it would probably take hours before order could be restored. It would then take a few more hours to equip everyone with space gear before they could proceed to migrate back to the Hope...

Even though the Hope's main energy circuit had already been upgraded, most of its remaining circuits were still in progress. If the Hope couldn't power up its life preservation system, the 120,000 people would have to stay in their space-gear. That would not work long-term because the spacesuits had limited battery life, so they could only function for...

Ying had never felt so crowded with worries and insecurities before in his life. He then received a newfound respect for Yao Yuan who had to look after these issues every waking

moment of his life.

"Zhang Heng, tell me immediately if you sense things changing... On the scale of 0 to 100, 100 being we're completely toast, how we are faring at this moment?" Ying whispered.

Shutting his eyes, Zheng Heng then paced around the room before stopping before Ying. "It should be around 80... No, 70!"

"70? Let's hope there's still time!"

On the other end of the base, Guang Zhen's team had changed into their full uniform after gathering all the remaining soldiers and functioning weapons. Starting from level 2, they began consoling the public while moving everyone up to the first floor. Simultaneously, Liu Bai's medical unit was making the rounds and offering help to the wounded. A temporary camp was set up to conduct simple surgeries and to act as a collection spot for the medical workers and supplies.

"Haven't I said not to conduct any invasive surgeries?! Prioritize stopping the bleeding before doing anything else!" yelled Liu Bai, when he saw a team of doctors cutting open a heavily wounded citizen to retrieve the objects that were lodged within.

The doctors were openly flustered before one of them spoke. "But Lieutenant Liu Bai, the patient's vena cava has been pierced. If we don't remove the object, it'll lead to internal bloating and he'll..."

"Just stop his bleeding first. You can continue the surgery back on the Hope!" Liu Bai stole a glance at the patient who appeared to be an engineer. Regardless, he continued forcefully, "First of all, we don't have much blood here because the blood bank is on the Hope. Secondly, we are extremely under equipped. Last and most importantly, you still have time to conduct these surgeries because the overall situation is not so bad on this level, but I assure you things are much worse on the first floor. Please do not think that we're in the middle of a hospital..."

"Because this is a battlefield!"

Even though Liu Bai normally had a polite demeanor, if need be, he could gather a frightening and commanding presence. The doctors who were used to his smiling face were too afraid to even look him in the eye at the moment.

"I repeat, this is a battlefield! We're no longer medical doctors but field doctors! It's our responsibility to save as many lives as we can and realize that pooling our resources on one

person is going leave another 10 to die. It's cruel, yes, but reality's cruel!"

After that, Liu Bai turned to finish stitching the wound of a woman who had gone unconscious. "There are only 120,000 people left on the Hope, so understand that our effort is utilitarian.... It might be amoral to let 100 people die so that another 1,000 can survive, but that is what we field doctors are supposed to do!"

"Take it from me. It's easier to

stomach that sting of guilt if you see it as hope for the greater good!"

"Yes, take it from me, the person who sacrificed his teammate's life so that more could live. Trust me, you'll eventually learn how to live with it..."

Liu Bai's last sentence was so soft that none of the people around him heard it. In fact, it felt like that proclamation was meant for his ears alone. Hurrying on to his next patient,

no one realized tears were mixed
with the sweat that was pouring
down his face...

By then, 30 minutes had passed
since the big earthquake...

Chapter 77: 24 Hours (2)

When Yao Yuan arrived at first floor, most of the 120,000 people had already been gathered there. It was incredibly crowded. Guang Zhen's team was busy patrolling, handing out bandages. The fallen debris coupled with the trampled tents and broken appliances lent the place the look of a refugee camp.

The faces of the many soldiers and citizens lit up with hope when they saw Yao Yuan. Many who had been sitting languidly on the floor stood up

involuntarily as they parted the way for Yao Yuan to pass through. The black-star close guards moved to huddle behind Yao Yuan.

Yao Yuan was suffused with an inexplicable feeling as he moved through the expectant crowd.

(Is this what you meant by responsibility? Just like how I've been leading the Black Stars, now I have to lead the last remnants of humanity as we struggle through space in search of a new home? This is one hell

of responsibility... One that I'm not sure I could keep on bearing...)

Yao Yuan had remained exceptionally quiet since he arrived, and before long, his vow of silence slowly infected the people present, until finally, with the exception of the sounds of breathing and children crying, not a single word could be heard.

Ying sidled up to his side to whisper in his ear when Yao Yuan reached the middle of the

crowd. Yao Yuan's expression shifted temporarily before returning to normal. Next, he ordered a few soldiers to construct a temporary stage.

While construction was going on, Guang Zhen led his team to report back to Yao Yuan. No words were exchanged, but a lot had been said between the two men's silent salute.

Yao Yuan took the stage and scanned the ample-sized crowd. The sea of people stretched beyond horizon. Just for

comparison, during the Chinese Olympics, the televised event featured a 90,000 sized crowd. A crowd that size could barely fit in the TV screen, so you can imagine how big the crowd on the first floor was!

It was a sight to behold.

Ebon came up the stage to hand Yao Yuan a microphone. Yao Yuan inwardly sighed when he saw Ebon struggling up the stairs with his prosthetic mechanical limbs. "Ladies and gentlemen, no, my fellow

survivors, you may or may not have seen me around the Hope, but I'm your captain, Yao Yuan.

"In the year 2029, Earth met its biggest catastrophe, wiping out all that it has nurtured. Our friends, families, and civilization, alongside Mother Earth, perished in that tragedy...

"But we're still alive! We who are no longer separated by countries, race, or skin color ever since we stepped onto the Hope, because underneath it all, we are only human, fellow

humans of Earth!

"Today, we come into yet another space tragedy not unlike the one we have faced on planet Sahara. Without the protection of Mother Earth, we're as fragile as hapless babies. We're unable to survive in space, much less conquer it...

"And yet, surviving we have been! With hope, with dreams of a new home, a better future, and survive we shall!"

Yao Yuan took a deep breath and yelled into the microphone, "I'm very glad that the deputy captain told me that there was no record of misconduct when he escorted everyone up here. In fact, there was barely any harsh jostling, so I'm very impressed! Even rocked by a sudden earthquake, everyone has managed to keep calm. Not only that, but you even helped and supported each other, so good on you!

"On that note, please remember today, and remember this spirit of charity during tragedy. Remember our hopes and

dreams, to one day feel the earth beneath our feet again, to feel the wind touch our skin.... Remember our children and our future generation, because we do it all for them so that they can wake up one day and take in not the cold, steel walls and empty space, but the sound of the sea and the warmth of the sun!

"And for that, I am willing to sacrifice everything, even my life! I hope you would too!"

The crowd's morale soared after Yao Yuan's speech. By the

end, people were chanting Yao Yuan's name in frenzied waves! Some butchered the unfamiliar Chinese pronunciation, but that only made it that much more inspiring.

"Alright, people, please calm down." Yao Yuan waved for the crowd to quiet down.

"Now, I need the men to step forth and follow your deputy captain to the second floor to retrieve the space-gear from the storeroom. Remember to account for your families and

take care of those who are unable to fend for themselves. Bring an extra spacesuit even if you're single; you might run into someone that will need it. Remember, we're all in this together!

"All the womenfolk please do look after your children. Those that can afford to lend a hand, search and rescue the wounded. Mend light wounds, but yell for military assistance if the injury is too serious.

"Let's move out and prepare to

get back to the Hope!"

Sustained chaos erupted after Yao Yuan finished speaking; however, that quickly siphoned into a disciplined fervor. Instead of idling blankly around the field, the men marched towards the storeroom and the women spread out to offer help.

Without wasting another breath, Yao Yuan turned to Guang Zhen. "How it's going, Ol' Wong? Have we established contact with the Hope?"

To which Guang Zhen replied with a shake of his head. "Unfortunately, no. The Academy suspects they will need 30 to 40 minutes to restart the Hope's energy system after an earthquake this size.... Then again, depending on the stage of the circuit upgrade, the downtime might increase to an hour. In any case, we have no idea what is happening on the Hope currently."

"Regardless, if there's another quake or something is indeed wrong with the star, I don't think this asteroid, or even the Hope, could survive that..." said

Yao Yuan tiredly.

The pair descended into a gloom of silence. They were briefed on the situation with the entrance by Ying. Although Zhang Heng's prediction had dropped from 70 to 60, the door would collapse in hours.

Ten seconds later, Yao Yuan picked up from where he left off. "Ol' Wong, I want you to continue maintaining order. Ying, form another team of ten to transport the wounded and the rest of the medical workers

to Liu Bai. Also, bring along some spacesuits for those that have recovered enough to move."

Addressing Lee and Ebon, Yao Yuan continued, "The pair of you, take the rest of the Black Star Unit to go and locate some technicians. I need them to drive the short-distance preservation buses up from the second floor to this floor. They might need to do several trips to transport all the kids, but we should have enough time. After that, make sure they go back to fetch Liu Bai, the medical crew, and the wounded."

"Major, what about me? Should I stay near the entrance?" asked Zhang Heng.

Yao Yuan paused before resuming. "No, Zhang Heng, I have another mission for you. Put on a spacesuit and take another one for Jay. I want you to go down to the pathway leading to the third floor, he's waiting there. Both of you need to put on a spacesuit, but keep the helmet open and don't use the life support system for now. You use it only after you hear big changes coming from above. The

oxygen supply in the spacesuits is limited and we need as many seconds as we can get out of it."

Zhang Heng nodded, but then he cautiously asked, "But if I'm gone, who will tell the danger level?"

Yao Yuan replied firmly, "Other Homo Evolutis... They'll need the field experience to grow, right? Didn't you go through the same thing on planet Sahara? Your skill got enhanced because of that experience, so this will be good training for the rest of

them. Don't worry, I have it covered."

Hesitation disappeared from Zhang Heng's eyes. He saluted before moving to join Ebon and the rest.

After Zhang Heng disappeared round the corner, Yao Yuan called for one of the close guards. "I want you to find me Ren Chou Yue. You should be able to tell her apart based on her ID. She's the Diviner, Ren Chou Yue!"

At that moment, Chou Yue was mumbling under her breath about the mistreatment against Ren Tao. She should've been the one sent to get the spacesuits. Her skinny brother could barely support one spacesuit, much less two. But since it was the captain's order, she had to stay behind helplessly and watch Ren Tao leave. She was fuming silently, replaying the words they had exchanged before they parted.

"Sis, I need you to squeeze to the front of the group to make sure you are one of the first to leave this base. I saw that Zhang

Heng guy wandering around the entrance for a long time; he's a diviner like you, right? I suspect...

"That the entrance might fall soon!"

It had been 50 minutes since the earthquake...

Chapter 78: 24 Hours (3)

Ren Tao was calm. Some might even say that he was being callously calm in spite of everything that was happening around him.

Situated in the middle of the crowd, he felt his surroundings to be exceptionally quiet. All the destruction, the debris, and the voices were nothing but mist that no longer clouded his mind. Instead, pieces were falling into place.

First, the quake was indeed a bit too sudden. The government was very careful about finding the perfect location to build this underground base. It was preposterous that they would end up choosing an earthquake-prone area.

If it wasn't caused by the location, then the next possibility would be a lack of structural integrity. However, Ren Tao quickly dismissed that idea. The fact that the base was still standing even after such a shake was an affirmative confirmation that the base was structurally sound. In fact, Ren

Tao was willing to bet the base was more stable and concrete than necessary.

So if it wasn't caused by internal sabotage, then the next logical conclusion would be that it had to be related to something external...

A picture of the star system they were in flashed across Ren Tao's mind. In his mind's eye, he could see the millions of meteorites stretched across the galaxy. In his mental reconstruction, the meteorite

the base was built on crashed into another meteorite because that was what he believed had happened.

In science, there exists a saying that goes: no matter how small the probability, if it's the only logical conclusion left, it has to be true.

It was not uncommon for meteorites to crash into one another during the initial planet formation stage. If it had happened once before, one could expect it to happen again and

again until the planet became stabilized.

Therefore, the pressing question would be... when will the next crash occur?!

Even though technically there was no safe space in a situation like these, the Hope was humanity's safest bet. Therefore, it was incredibly likely that when push came to shove, the government would not hesitate to sacrifice a few to save the majority. It sounded cruel, but that would net

humanity the best chance at survival. In spite of his words, Ren Tao was certain that as long as the Hope remained under Major Yao Yuan's leadership, this would be the route the government would take.

Even though the Hope only had a population of 120,000, Ren Tao suspected that the government had a full storage of frozen human ovum and sperm to turn to if they needed to repopulate the ship. After all, they had the technology.

A few months ago, news regarding the government officials that had abandoned Earth before them broke. Even though their ships were only big enough to accommodate a few thousand people, their bank of genetic materials could breed many times its carriage limit. Who could be sure the same couldn't be said of the Hope?

Therefore, if the situation arose, Ren Tao believed that the Hope's government would not hesitate to turn its back on its own people...

(Zhang Heng, the known Diviner, has been roaming around the entrance for a while now, so this means that the source of danger will probably come from that door. During evacuation, the first group to be sent back to the Hope will be members of the Academy and their families. It will take four or five trips to transport all of them. Then, it will be the Homo Evolutis and specialized workers like doctors and nurses, and they'll probably bring along the wounded...)

On that thought, Ren Tao felt relief permeate his body. Chou

Yue was one of the known Homo Evolutis, so she would reach the safety of the Hope soon. As long as she was safe, he had nothing more to worry about.

Comforted by that thought, Ren Tao gradually returned to his oblivious self as he was swept by the public towards the second floor's storeroom.

Back on the Hope, the repair crew was engrossed in emergency updates. Everyone onboard felt the earthquake, and not only that, they could see

what was causing it through the cabin windows.

As if suddenly charged by energy, the idling meteorites around them started flying towards and crashing into one another. Pulled into each other by a mysterious force, the Hope was witnessing a particularly destructive dance. However, most alarmingly, many on the Hope swore that the asteroids that resulted from one of these collisions were surging towards them. They couldn't provide actual evidence for it, but they could feel it firmly in their guts.

No matter what, the first thing they had to do was establish contact with the underground base. Without orders from Yao Yuan and information from the Academy, they were effectively lost.

"Ignore the circuit update for the remaining system for now! We need to finish installing these few circuits and get the ship back online! For the rest, leave the old circuit in! Quick! We need to move!"

The circuit update crew comprised of more than 1,000 technicians and electricians. The man who led the crew was the Chinese engineer from Germany, Liu Ren De. He was part of a group that worked on Earth's space station. At that moment, he was practically screaming.

"Pick up the slack! We have another 15 minutes to complete the finishing touches on this set of circuits. After that, initiate the Hope's main power to activate its life support, air circulatory, and anti-gravitational systems. Leave the

rest!"

An engineer beside him asked, "Liu, are you sure that's ok? How about the surveillance system? Shouldn't we prioritize that to know what's happening?"

Ren De replied without taking his eyes away from his work. "What difference would that information make? Are we going to abandon the rest knowing that the meteorite is going to explode the next second? No, we won't!

"There are 120,000 people in that base. Let's assume we can survive the loss of the major, but without the Academy, what will that entail?

"That means that we are only delaying the inevitable! Yes, we could teach our children knowledge about circuits and electrical appliances, but who is going to educate them on subjects like biology, chemistry, and physics? Can you? No! So running is not an option. The only option we have is to restore the Hope's power to contact the base and wait for the scientists and others to return."

The engineer was lectured into submission and sighed quietly. "Of course you're right. We could only survive with the three bodies, Academy, Workshop and Barracks, intact.... Okay, I'll go rush my team to speed up the progress."

Ren De nodded and smiled weakly. "At least rest in the comfort of knowing that we've tried our best and hope that God will look kindly upon us for that..."

"So are we turning to God now?"

While Yao Yuan was managing the rescue missions around the first floor, the scientists and their families were already gathered around one corner of the room. Many were praying to their gods and ancestors.

Yao Yuan wasn't going to interrupt such an overt display of faith because he found the faithful to be more trustworthy than the atheists. Simultaneously, he realized that

the Hope needed to address the subject of religion if they survived this ordeal.

Even though there were initial conflicts between the citizens of the Hope due to their wide-ranging backgrounds, those were being slowly smoothed out as time passed. They only needed time to realize they were all allies on the same ship. Time and constant exposure to other cultures had worked wonders on overcoming the racist sentiments.

The single source of contention that had remained divisive had stayed inconspicuous, so much so that Yao Yuan had overlooked it... and that was religion.

For the Asians, this was a non-issue because their major religion of Buddhism and Hinduism had a similar root. The real trouble was the animosity between the western and middle-eastern religions...

This, however, was a sensitive area, so even though Yao Yuan knew that it was a giant

problem, he knew that he needed better tact and planning before broaching it. Plus, the occasion didn't call for it.

Right then, the military came back with the first set of spacesuits. Yao Yuan quickly ordered the members of Academy and their families to put them on. Then, a small team of 50 soldiers was assigned to escort this important group of people back to the Hope.

It had been 1 hour and 25 minutes since the earthquake...

The reason given by the author for the Asians being not a problem was because they weren't firm believers of their faith, which are just all sorts of weird.

Chapter 79: 24 Hours (4)

"This is the underground base, over. I repeat, this is the underground base, over..."

A few soldiers were yelling into the communicator on the first floor, but they had received nothing but static in return.

Even though they had screamed until their voices were hoarse, they didn't cease passing the communicator around to each person so that they could try to

gain contact with the Hope. Suddenly, the static cleared. Everyone was shocked, but they quickly huddled around the soldier who held the communicator.

The soldier took a deep breath and said, with a coarse voice, "This is the underground base's temporary central command. Over. Can you hear me?"

A few seconds later, a clear voice came from the other end of the communicator. "Yes, I can hear you just fine! This is the

Hope's central command. I'm Jason, the Hope's security crew leader. Please contact Major Yao Yuan immediately; there has been an emergency!"

"Understood. The Major will be here in a minute," replied the soldier.

A moment later, a sweaty Yao Yuan rushed into the room and swiped the communicator in his palm. "This is Yao Yuan. Give me a report on the Hope's current situation."

What followed was the crackling of papers. After a while, Jason's gruffly voice came through. "Yes, sir. Below is the updated report on the Hope's overall situation. The circuit upgrade for the biomes, reactors, life support, circulatory, and anti-gravitational systems has been completed. The crew is a third of the way through upgrading the ship's lighting system. Minor systems like transportation and domestic electricity haven't been touched..."

Yao Yuan interjected, "What about the surveillance system?"

"The engineering and repair crew is working on that as we speak. However, because most of the Hope's systems have been powered on, the upgrade will probably take a while. According to the main engineer, Liu Ren De's, report, they will need another four to five hours to complete the project."

Yao Yuan compared this new information to the original circuit upgrade schedule and sighed in relief when he realize that Ren De must have sidetracked the crew to focus on

restoring the important life support systems when the tragedy hit. "A job well done. In the meantime, I want you to pay special attention to the surrounding meteorites. Report back immediately if there are any dangerous changes. Keep the channel of communication open. Also, the first batch of scientists is currently being escorted back to the Hope. Please keep them safe."

"Sir, yes, sir!", saluted Jason.

The scientists and their

families were already in spacesuits when Yao Yuan returned to the first floor field. The 6,000 people were being led by the 50 soldiers through the base entrance.

Following protocol, the crowd had to go through the vacuum decontamination rooms before leaving the base. Each of the rooms could only accommodate 1,000 people per cycle. Even if they rushed through the progress, it would take at least five minutes to complete one cycle. This group of scientists alone used 30 minutes to exit the base.

And this was without taking into account the time needed for them to put on the spacesuits...

Yao Yuan's expression got increasingly gloomier, but he still maintained his patience while guiding everyone through the process. Right then, the second batch of spacesuits arrived. They still had 500 suits left after everyone had taken their share.

After rejecting the suit offered to him by the soldiers, Yao Yuan

firmly said, "Gather all the remaining doctors, engineers, and technicians. Bring along all the Homo Evolutis as well and everyone that survived Virus X. Give them each a spacesuit."

The few soldiers hesitated before finally saluting and leaving.

At the same time, Chou Yue was drifting around the base's entrance desolately, mumbling under her breath, "He really thinks I have superpowers?! He must be joking! This divining

power he speaks of is nothing more than a woman's intuition. I'm not Zhang Heng, that freak of nature. He must be kidding..."

Chou Yue had half a mind to abandon her post, but she didn't have the guts to follow through. When Yao Yuan approached her, even though he wasn't overtly menacing, Chou Yue could feel the threat inherent in his orders.

Suddenly, Chou Yue felt her surroundings get impressively quiet, so much so that she could

barely hear herself anymore. However, she could somehow hazily pick up the sound of rocks grinding coming from the foundation beside the entrance door. It was short and barely a whisper. That was, however, followed by an intense fear. Chou Yue felt like she had been transported to a cliff side and was staring down into certain doom.

She involuntarily took several steps back, which caused her to trip over some fallen debris. Her actions attracted the attention of the few soldiers stationed nearby. One of them quickly

rushed to her side, asking, "What's wrong? Did you feel something?"

"Danger... Intense danger..." Chou Yue said, with a shiver. "The rock layers supporting the door on both sides has moved. I can feel incredible warnings of danger coming from it."

The soldiers exchanged worried glances, and the soldier who came to help Chou Yue spoke into his walkie-talkie. Soon after that, Yao Yuan arrived at the scene. He saluted the soldiers

before squatting down to address Chou Yue. "I'm sorry to have to put you through this, but could you explain what you're feeling in details?"

Chou Yue nodded hesitantly and then repeated what she had told the soldier but in greater detail. Yao Yuan's face dimmed as he heard Chou Yue's story, but after she finished, he smiled. "Thank you for your service. You're one of the Homo Evolutis, so to be fair, you should be able to join the rest of them when they retreat back to the Hope after this. But the base needs your power, so I thank you

immensely for your willingness to stay. But here, please put on this spacesuit." Yao Yuan waved for a soldier's aid and a spacesuit appeared in Chou Yue's lap.

With the soldiers' help, Chou Yue successfully struggled into the spacesuit. Suddenly, she grabbed hold of Yao Yuan and asked, "It's okay if you ask me to stay. But I have a brother called Ren Tao. If it's possible, can you make sure he's one of the first to return to the Hope?"

Yao Yuan was dumbfounded by

the sudden request. He whispered to a soldier who then typed hurriedly into a device, and soon enough, information on Ren Tao popped up on the screen. He handed the device over to Yao Yuan.

"It says here he's one of the survivors of Virus X. This means that he'll be joining the Homo Evolutis when they depart from this base, so don't you worry," said Yao Yuan comfortingly.

Chou Yue nodded calmly. She then turned her focus to the

entrance door. Her brother's face with that stupid grin of his slowly appeared in her mind...

That giant idiot!

With the departure of the second batch of Academy members, the base had successfully evacuated 12,000 people, almost 1/10 of its total population.

It had been 2 hours and 40 minutes since the quake...

At the same time, the Hope's surveillance crew was able to confirm that a small planet's shattered asteroids were indeed flying their way...

Chapter 80: 24 Hours (5)

Jay laid his tired body on top of a fallen rock. After lighting another cigarette, he flung the old one away to join the cluster of cigarette butts that littered his feet.

Turning to look at Zhang Heng, he kindly advised, "You can stop staring at the caved in entrance, you know? Come, take a break."

It was little wonder why Jay said so, because Zhang Heng

looked exceptionally pale. He looked like a dying patient, not someone that had undergone a daily intensive training regime. Ever since he joined the Black Star Unit, Zhang Heng had been training alongside the rest of them. Of course, his physique still couldn't rival the rest, but his physical state was already better than normal soldiers.

The reason for his blanched façade was because the usage of superhuman power would drain its user immensely. This was known among all the Black Star members. Research had shown that using the power would

greatly lower one's blood glucose level and, more importantly, present a heavy strain on one's mental acuity.

Comparatively speaking, passive powers like Zhang Heng's divination were less draining than Jay's mental manipulation, which was more active. Zhang Heng had been using his power for several hours; that was why he was so tired.

Sighing, Zhang Heng picked a spot that was slightly far away

from the caved in entrance and sat down. "The passageway is completely blocked, but the things inside should be fine, because I didn't feel any warnings of danger."

After a short silence, Jay gave Zhang Heng a soft pat on his shoulder, saying, "Thank you."

Zhang Heng chuckled lightly. "Why thank me? This is what I'm supposed to do. It's you that I'm worried about, actually. If you have to keep on tricking those plants, the strain you'll be

under to keep your power activated..."

As a reserved member of the Black Star Unit, Yao Yuan could have ordered Jay to do exactly that, but he opted for a more diplomatic measure because these circumstances were incredibly unique.

Depending on the third floor's storage of chemical potion and the time needed to mine a way in, Jay might need to keep on lying for more than two hours... two hours! It was practically

unheard of!

It was, in other words, a death sentence...

Even though that was not uncommon on the battlefield, the circumstances were different because Jay's power was irreplaceable. Yao Yuan realized that forcing him into the task would only backfire. After all, it was only natural for one to push back if one was forcefully pushed towards certain death.

Jay smoked silently, mulling over what Zhang Heng said. Suddenly, he heard light snoring coming from his side. He turned to realize that Zhang Heng had fallen asleep. Sighing, he helped Zhang Heng lie down into a more comfortable position and then lit another cigarette.

(... Why would you guys place such deep trust in me?)

(Bunch of idiots!)

Beyond the underground base,

the first batch of scientists had reached the Hope. After consoling and dispatching their families, the group of scientists walked silently to the Academy. Huddled in their respective labs, they started collating the collected data.

"...of course I would love to stay. Faced with this big tragedy, I'm as afraid as you are. I saw several people get crushed by falling rocks with my own eyes. Like our old friend, John. He was hit in the head and is still currently unconscious. So of course I'm afraid. But this is what I have to do."

A scientist said consolingly to his family.

"This is why we are allowed to leave the base so far ahead of everyone else. It's not because of our stature, power, or anything like that. It's the knowledge that we could provide!"

The scientist continued with a hint of pride intermingling with sadness.

"It is our responsibility to utilize this knowledge to provide a better chance at survival for the rest. We're living on their charity, so we owe them that much!"

This appreciation for life and sacrifice was inherently understood by this group of scientists that was given early leave. The scope of privilege they had been given didn't go unnoticed.

On the Hope, the technician crews were well into their 10

hour shift. There was supposed to be at least three shift changes, but because most of the Workshop was stuck in the underground base, they had to barrel on. However, no one complained. Surviving on bites of energy bars and fresh water, everyone slaved away until the surveillance and security system finally came back online.

"Initiating energy buffers, counting down on central mainframe, three, two..."

With the return of the Hope's

surveillance system, a bunch of data appeared on the computer screen almost instantly. They included observations on the sun, the star system, the earthquake, and the intergalactic magnetic fields.

Everyone came for their needed data and left. Analysis, experiments, discussions erupted all over the Hope. Everyone was trying their best to achieve their objective!

Disregarding the workers that were trapped in the industrial

layer and the people that had been escorted back to the Hope, the base still housed around 110,000 people. That was about 90 percent of the total population!

It was not an understatement to say that the Academy's work was life-saving!

At times like these, it was easy to see that the spirit of Professor Alison had lived on through his colleagues...

Back on the meteorite, 100 soldiers were escorting the second batch of citizens out of the base. The 14,000-sized crowd comprised of the remaining scientists, the known and latent Homo Evolutis, doctors, technicians, teachers, and their families.

Other than the soldiers that were on escort detail, every single military member, including the Major and all the Lieutenants, had remained in the base.

Just like how Yao Yuan had promised Chou Yue, he strived to be fair in his judgment regardless of circumstances. He had to abandon most of the people when they departed from Earth because he had to be selective. Not a day had gone by that he was not tormented by that decision...

In the end, he knew that equality was not possible, so he settled for fairness. And fairness couldn't be contaminated by personal interest. Therefore, he had ordered the military to stay because that was what they had signed up for. In fact, Yao Yuan

promised that he would be the last to leave the base...

Chou Yue asked skeptically, "That's what he said? Ren Tao, this is certainly just for show, right?"

Beside her, Ren Tao, who was also in a spacesuit, shook his head mildly. "No, I don't think so. If it's just optics, he should have presented that statement during the gathering at the field, but he didn't. Furthermore, the Major's political standing is currently unshakable, so there's

no reason for him to do this other than the fact that...

"This is what he truly believes."

Ren Tao continued, with a mysterious expression, "You can see for yourself how strong the Major's prestige is. The crowd was instantly silenced the moment he walked into the field, remember? Furthermore, even though the people are leaving in batches, no one complained about the arrangement. Because they knew they could place their

trust in the Major. He's the force that ground the Hope. As long as he's around, I believe the Hope will be not rocked, unless, of course, god forbid, something unfortunate happens to him in the course of this crisis...

"He truly wishes the best for these people.... It appears I have misunderstood our Major. Yes, the frozen eggs could repopulate half the population, but they'll be babies; they're useless in keeping the Hope or humanity and its civilization burning. And I believe that was his plan all along, and that's why he hasn't left."

After Ren Tao concluded his observation, Chou Yue butted in to ask crossly, "Then what about you? Why did you stay? You should've been able to leave with the rest of them, right?"

"Well, you know me. I tire easily. My legs could barely move after carrying those two spacesuits, so I figured I'd come join you," Ren Tao replied with a happy chuckle.

He barely had time to evade the incoming punch. It passed

through his open helmet and
landed on his left eye.

"You are a giant idiot!"

Chapter 81: 24 Hours (6)

Zhang Xian He was an unassuming middle-aged man. To be even more specific, he was an unassuming economic analyst who flew under the radar for most of his life.

His looks were as average as his professional standing. Carrying a pouch that came with working habits that required him to spend hours in front of a desk, he had a trusting smile and balding head. His agreeable and harmless appearance was unusual for his occupation and it

made him look at least a decade older than his actual age.

That was also why Xian He had been unlucky with the ladies. Even though he was kind, loving and responsible, he was shy and awkward around the ladies. His lack of romantic success was also compounded by the fact that he only attracted those that see him for his money. That was why it was only at his middle age that Xian He had his first serious relationship.

That year he was 41 years old

and was aimlessly strolling down the beach. It was then that he ran into a young beautiful OL whose bag was robbed by a few truants...

That woman later became his wife, and they were blessed with a precious daughter. The gravity of his life shifted to his family, a family he would sacrifice everything for!

On The Hope, even though Xian He and his wife were both highly educated and knowledgeable citizens with

proficiency in multiple languages, they melted perfectly into the crowd. They were not scientists, engineers, soldier, doctors or teachers...

In other words, they weren't going to be one of the firsts to leave the underground base.

Xian He sat silently beside his wife and daughter. He and his wife were already in their spacesuits but their 2 years old wasn't because she was too tiny to fit into the space gear. As if feeling left out, she was fussing

about cradled in her mother's arms.

Xian He watched his family with a silent interest...

When he saw another short-distance life preservation bus moved towards the entrance, he finally decided he had to speak up. Standing up, he yelled, "We should let the children back onto The Hope first. They don't have the protection of a spacesuit. It's too dangerous for them to stay here," rallying the people around him, he

continued, "Don't you agree with me, fellas? We should let the children and their mothers evacuate the base first. It's our responsibility as man to stay behind to ensure their safety!"

Xian He wasn't being exceptionally loud but his message rang loud and clear. At least 10 families heard his call to action. Among these families were 3 children, 2 toddlers and even one pregnant mother. It didn't take them too long to rally behind Xian He's cause. Slowly but surely, the commotion spread.

This inevitably attracted the attention of the soldiers who immediately contacted Yao Yuan. A civilian uprising was the thing they feared the most. And it wasn't like there was no merit behind it, after all, these people had been left behind to preserve a better survival chance for others. Furthermore, the 1000 plus soldiers won't be able to contain a rampaging several ten thousand people...

Yao Yuan instantly rushed to the scene with a small troop of soldiers. He breathed a great

sigh of relief when he arrived. It was a very contained chaos. The people were talking, and not yelling, among themselves. However, because there were too many speakers, it was hard to make up what they were discussing.

Yao Yuan though knew this was a situation that he needed to tread lightly upon. Accompanied by his soldiers, he wiggled into the crowd. With his arrival, like magic, the crowd gradually silenced.

Yao Yuan's frown deepened. Then, a slightly rotund middle-aged man stood up. Instead of coming forth, he stood calmly at his spot and said, "Major, we have a request."

"Of course, sir, do tell. If it's reasonable, we'll gladly accept," replied Yao Yuan.

With a bravery that rarely came to him, Xian He continued steadily, "Major, as you can see, there are many children, toddlers and even pregnant mothers here. Now that the

scientists had been escorted out, I beg of you to please let the children and their mother leave first. The children need their mother. As you know, the kids don't have access to the spacesuit...

And we, the man, are willing to stay behind!"

Xian He's legs were shaking when he finished his speech. This was the second time he showed such courage in his life. The first was when he finally popped the big question to his

wife. It was equally disconcerting both times.

Everyone, including Yao Yuan, responded with a deep silence.

In reality, it was the doctors and engineers' turn to be evacuated. Coupled with their family members, there were about 50000 of them. Only a third of them had left the base. With this speed, it would take another 3 to 4 hours to get this group fully out of the base.

"Okay. I will allow the children priority to board the short-distance bus. Don't need to be so precise with the carry limit. It can fit an extra 3 to 4 people than the suggested limit. The Hope is not that far away... Yes, let their mothers follow but arrangement will have to be made so that men of the family will have to wait for a later turn," Yao Yuan finally announced.

Xian He could barely contain his emotion. With tears stinging his eyes, he gripped his hands tightly as he thanked Yao Yuan profusely.

Yao Yuan saluted the crowd in return and left the area. Long after he had left, as if coming out of a coma, the crowd erupted in violent cheers, and the remaining 10 soldiers moved to update their records.

"Sacrifice oneself to give one's wife and children the best hope at survival?" sighed Yao Yuan.

Xian He's wife was completely stunned by his husband's behavior. After Yao Yuan and his soldiers had left, she tugged at

his sleeve tightly, "Have you lost your mind? It's our turn after this batch of people. Why... why would you make such a request? What about yourself? You..."

His wife, usually the prevailing one in their relationship, was visibly flustered. Just like her words, her tears were out of her control.

In their marriage, his wife had learnt that Xian He was a kind and accommodating partner. In work and in marriage, he was not the one to stake his claim.

What he just did was a complete surprise.

Xian He enveloped his wife in a tight hug and kissed his daughter, he smiled, "Don't worry, I'll be fine. The most important thing is that you and Yu Er will be safe. Plus, the major himself hasn't left. If there's real danger, I'm sure he'll figure something out. Plus, with this spacesuit, I can survive several hours in space, so don't worry too much."

Holding on to their daughter,

his wife's tears were flowing freely now. Resting her head on her husband's shoulder, she felt incredibly safe and protected. She had not chosen the wrong man...

Soon after, the children were put onto the short-distance bus. Following close behind were the mothers. Escorted by a troop of soldiers, they were led back onto The Hope. There was no shortage of wet eyes in the crowd...

The men they loved had given

up their lives for themselves and their children...

Back on The Hope, The Academy had compiled their first report...

The system was undergoing dramatic changes. Transformation of the star had introduced a giant force of seismic change into the solar system. Think of the system as a magnetized field, a change on one end would affect the whole field.

And surrounding this field is a smattering of minute metallic pieces. However, because they are situated some distance apart from the center of the field, instead of being pulled towards it, they will become magnetized!

The bigger they are, the faster they'll become magnetized, and the stronger their pulling force will be!

It was a phenomenon The Academy couldn't explain... It was well beyond human technology's comprehension.

They could only offer stipulation based on learnt theories. For example, the gravity of the meteorite they were on had increased to $1/11$ of Earth's gravity and it was still growing!

In other words, the meteorite was pulling nearby intergalactic substances towards them!

This was probably how a terrestrial planet forms itself!

Make no mistake though because it was also an

irrevocable disaster! If another asteroid of similar size ram into the meteorite, it will not only cause an earthquake, they would shatter upon impact!

"According the increasing speed of the gravity and distance from nearby asteroids... We have another 18 to 19 hours before a collision of devastating scale would occur!"

It had been 4 hours and 50 minutes since the quake...

36000 people were on The
Hope...

Chapter 82: 24 Hours (7)

"This won't work," said Ren Tao as he fixed his blank gaze at the entrance.

A pale Chou Yue beside him asked, "What do you mean?" Leaning weakly into Ren Tao, she had lost that earlier fiery spark in her eyes.

"You and that door..." Ren Tao continued with a hint of worry in his voice, "it took almost 5 hours to escort half of the

population out, it would take another 5 to evacuate the rest, but this door..."

"This door would not hold for another hour according to your superpower. This is an unmitigated disaster!" finished a vexed Ren Tao.

After a pregnant silence, Chou Yue replied, "But what can we do about it? Everyone has to follow protocols when leaving the base, and for safety's sake, they are supposed to be that long..."

"What if we remove the door ourselves before it falls?"

Shattering his usual oblivious countenance was a sharp glint of brilliance in his eyes, it was as if the thinker within had suddenly awoken.

A few minutes later, Ren Tao could be found accosting Yao Yuan.

"A demolition job? Do you fathom what you're saying, the consequences that it would

bring?" asked an incredulous Yao Yuan.

Ren Tao nodded obediently, "Of course. The moment the door is broken down, it'll create a giant pressure built from the air within the base being forcefully sucked out into space. This pressure will be strong enough to carry people out with it, and since the meteorite's gravity is only $1/12$ of Earth's, if the person is taken too far away from the surface of the meteorite, he or she would be lost forever in space. So, this could be a giant disaster that will probably wipe out tens of thousands of people!"

Barely containing his anger, Yao Yuan waved Ren Tao away, "If you're clear with the consequences, why would you suggest such a ludicrous idea? Have you lost your mind? Go disturb someone else... or you're hankering to leave already? Tell me if you are, I'll move you to the front of the group."

Ren Tao though continued stubbornly, "I'm just describing what will happen if we demolish the entrance, yes it is going to be a disaster and I could guarantee not one tenth of the people will

survive this demolition... But since the entrance is going to fall within the next hour anyway, why not bet against certain doom?"

Surprised by Ren Tao's acute observation, after giving it some thought, Yao Yuan tossed him a report, saying, "read this."

Ren Tao read the report carefully. It was the report from the geological unit. Using powerful sonar rays, The Hope's surveillance room was able to tell that the rock layer

surrounding the underground base entrance would not hold for another hour. In fact, they speculated the door would only keep on standing for another 40 minutes.

Ren Tao was not surprised by the report's result, calmly he returned the report and said, "We're facing down certain doom, one way or another tens of thousands of people are going to die. Instead of walking willingly into it, why not challenge death itself?"

"And how do you suggest we do that?" asked Yao Yuan noncommittally, unconvinced a boy like Ren Tao could potentially provide any useful idea.

"First we need to shut down all the air circulatory system in the base. Next, we will use the multiple quarantine rooms to pre-release all the air in the base. Then, instead of waiting for the door to collapse, we will blow it up using C4 that will be strategically placed at the entrance's weak points. After the door is down, the people won't need to waste time going

through the protocols anymore. With this, we can retreat to The Hope within the shortest time possible!

Key to the success of this plan is that all the children have already been transported back to The Hope. A short jog in space will not harm us adults who are equipped with the necessary space gear!"

Yao Yuan turned to take a good look at Ren Tao. He was so surprised by his proposal that he stood up from his seated

position.

Frowning, Yao Yuan started circling around the small area. After deliberating the multiple conditions of Ren Tao's proposal, he finally said, "Yes, your suggestion might work. Indeed, the crucial point is the balance of air pressure within and without the base. If we pre-release the air in the base, we could bypass the tragedy that would form due to the great difference in air pressure. Now, we just need someone who can accurately pinpoint the weak points in the entrance foundation. If we're not

carefully, we might initiate a chain of explosions that will bring the whole base down..."

Ren Tao smiled kindly, "I'm here just to get the ball rolling. The rest is beyond my capacity... Furthermore, I believe there is an explosive expert within the Black Star unit. Am I wrong?"

Yao Yuan stared long and hard at Ren Tao. "I understand. Chou Yue can now be safely released from her post. She might be a bit weak on her feet so help her get into one of the short-distance

buses. Also... Ren Tao, I believe you might have something to report to me after this whole disaster is over..."

Ren Tao smiled bitterly and mysteriously before turning to head down Chou Yue's direction.

Yao Yuan didn't mull on Ren Tao's situation but immediately contacted The Hope using his communicator. He couldn't just follow Ren Tao's suggestion without approval from The Academy, but he believed... Ren Tao had hit the hammer on its

head.

Not long after that, everyone in the base was told to put on their space helmet and activate their spacesuit's life support system. Alongside powering up the remaining short-distance buses, the whole enterprise took about 10 minutes. In that time, exhausted military men moved through the crowd, double-checking for safety.

After everyone was ready, and the circulatory as well as gravitational system for the base

had been logged off, approval from The Academy finally arrived!

Yao Yuan acted upon it quickly, ordering everyone to move away from the entrance. Then all the quarantine chambers open their doors. Air in the base escaped swiftly into space through these special channels, it took barely 10 minutes for it to complete doing so.

After that, rocks around the entrance started to move. Weakening in its structure was

so obvious that even normal citizens could see the door was beginning its collapse. There was a burgeoning commotion among the people but that was quickly stamped down. The reason for that was simple and obvious, it was as Ren Tao had said, the major was the grounding force for the citizens of The Hope.

All the Black Star members were also present and the explosive expert revealed himself to be Wa Luo, the impertinent young man who often treated things way too lightly. No one had expected him

to be part of the Black Star, much less one of the Special Forces.

Yao Yuan didn't provide much explanation to Wa Luo after giving him the directives, but many was communicated in the wordless salute that followed. In comparison to Yao Yuan who was incredibly serious, Wa Luo retained his happy-go-lucky countenance, his frivolous nature betraying none of the seriousness of the situation.

The rest of the Black Star

members though knew about the explosive genius that hid behind that flighty appearance. Known as the firecracker, Wa Luo was scarily proficient in setting, measuring, and placing explosives. His moniker was not because he was a colloquial firecracker but rather he could crack the inner workings of fiery explosives like a hacker could crack computers.

Therefore, when Ren Tao first mentioned the explosive expert in Black Star, Yao Yuan's thoughts immediately zeroed in on Yang Wa Luo, the proud collector of prime AV films and

connoisseur of the Loli culture, a young man with an impressively deep interior that hid behind a facetious exterior!

Armed with the high-tech sonar pictures beamed over by The Academy, installation of the explosives took barely a moment. Entering a state of eternal silence, Wa Luo could see beyond the physical realm the location where the rocks had moved, the range it had moved, the minute cracks in the wall, and possible explosion range. He could literally hear the rock layers moving, sliding into place. Based on his intuition and

experience, the explosives were properly set.

It was an indescribable sensation... The best he could come up with was how Ebon described it, the feeling of being a [Perceptor](#).

When Wa Luo returned to behind the safety line, he had paled considerably. He felt light on his head but he still kept that insolent smile of his.

He nodded at Yao Yuan whom

returned a similar gesture. Taking in a deep breath, Yao Yuan announced, "Explosion counting down. 3, 2, 1..."

For those who witnessed it from The Hope, a roiling cloud of dust could be seen floating out of the base's entrance. The cloud then dispersed to reveal a gaping hole, where there had once been the entrance door...

It had been 6 hours and 50 minutes since the quake...

And 16 hours to the big collision...

A Homo Evolutis with great power of perception. Term lifted from the Transformers comic series.

Chapter 83: 24 Hours (8)

Yao Yuan's intention to employ explosives to demolish the entrance faced quite a sizeable resistance; even the Academy voiced its concerns. However, Yao Yuan decided to go ahead with the plan because none could offer a better resolution... Ren Tao was right, it was do-or-die.

After the resounding explosion, almost everyone on the Hope gathered at the windows facing the base. Many were praying tearfully, praying for the safety

of their families and friends who were still trapped in the underground base. This was especially true for the women who were allowed an early leave due to the voluntary sacrifice of their husbands.

The most hectic room on the Hope was, however, its surveillance room. Training all its scanning and tracking devices on the underground base, technicians and scientists hustled about the room checking and collecting data. This was data on the base's geological condition, structural integrity, and the general situation around

the meteorite.

"... The scanning feed is now online! The explosion has collapsed the door and nobody's hurt. It didn't loosen the rocks nor did it cause a cave-in! The mission is a success! The entrance is now 20 meters wide!"

Through the Hope's broadcasting network, the good news was quickly spread among the citizens. It was received with cheers of joy. It had turned many tears of sorrow into ones

of joy.

The aftershock of the explosion knocked most of the people on the base's first floor off their feet. The explosives used were the latest invention of the 21st century. Using a liquid oxygen base, it could create high-powered explosions without requiring exposure to atmospheric air. It was the perfect selection to use in a vacuum surrounding.

10 seconds after the explosion, the Black Star members were

the first to stand up. Relief swept over them when they confirmed that the explosion didn't bring the whole entrance down with it. The 20 meter hole that resulted from the explosion was more than enough to speed up the transfer of the remaining people.

As more people regained their footing from the blast, a sense of contained joy spread through the crowd. Even the frown that was previously locked on Yao Yuan's face relaxed. Without wasting any more time, with the military-escorted short-distance buses leading the way, people

swarmed through the entrance in an orderly manner. It took only half an hour for the whole group of people to reach the cabin door of the Hope. Now all they needed to do was wait for their turn to pass through the decontamination rooms.

Being so close to their symbolic hope and the place where they had called home, many in the crowd broke down in tears. Many tried but failed self-consciously when they moved to wipe the tears flowing from their eyes, the screen of their space helmet blocking the way. The little blunders lent a small

bubble of mirth.

Yao Yuan, on the other hand, was busy maintaining a constant channel of communication with the Hope's surveillance room. He needed continuous updates on every situation.

"... According to our heat sensors, there are still several thousand people trapped in the third floor. Due to its isolated existence, the pre-releasing of the air in the first and second level hasn't affected it much. The people down there are still

alive."

At that point of the report, Yao Yuan interjected, "Is there a reason why we are still unable to establish contact with the third level people?"

"Even though that level is equipped with a communicator, its telephone cable must have been destroyed during the initial earthquake... And Major, I'm sorry to report this, but since that level is only specialized for industrial purposes, they do not have access to any wireless

communicators. They also can't contact us via the space helmets' attached communication device because all the spacesuits are stored in the second level storeroom."

"In other words, the several thousand technicians down there are essentially cut off from the rest? The upper two levels are now a space of vacuum, so without access to spacesuits and communication, even if the way to the industrial level is cleared, the situation will be..." Yao Yuan sighed frustratedly instead of finishing his thoughts.

The other end of the communicator was also steeped in silence, lamenting the third level's regretful state.

Gritting his teeth, Yao Yuan was at a loss for words. Suddenly, he was hit with a vision of Ren Tao. Without giving it much thought, he started looking around and ordered the few guards beside him to locate Ren Tao.

Soon after, a reluctant Ren Tao was brought before Yao Yuan.

He grumbled, "Why do you have to pull me out of the line? I was right in the middle of it, but now I have to start again at the back."

Without preamble, Yao Yuan ordered, "Switch your communicator to the xxxx channel now."

Ren Tao moved reluctantly, but he did switch the communicator within his helmet over to the specified channel. Then, Yao Yuan said hurriedly, "Ren Tao, as I've promised, Chou Yue is one of the first to return to the Hope.

She's in the short-distance bus. You can see it for yourself, right?"

Ren Tao nodded cautiously, knowing full well that Yao Yuan had something more up his sleeve.

"I don't care what kind of Homo Evolutis you are, or even if you aren't one, but I seriously need your help here. It's regarding the people that are trapped in the third level of the underground base..."

Yao Yuan proceeded to explain the conundrum. He included the details about the lack of communication, spacesuits, and the danger that could be realized from the difference in air pressure.

Ren Tao had maintained his usual oblivious expression throughout Yao Yuan's elaboration.

"Ren Tao, if you can point out the right direction, a military ranking, a wealth of H-coins, a guarantee of your and your

sister's safety, if you name it I shall provide... Just help me overcome this problem. If you're not doing it for me, do it for the people down there. These several thousand people have worked through sweat, tears, and blood to keep everything afloat; we can't turn our backs on them now!

"Those are good people that have done nothing wrong. In fact, they have done many things right! So if there's a sliver of chance, no matter how small it is, I'm going to save them! So please, show me the way to that sliver of a chance!" finished Yao

Yuan.

Ren Tao could feel the gears in his brain turning, but that sensation only remained fleetingly. A glint of inspiration appeared in his otherwise inattentive expression and he yawned. "I won't say there is absolutely no way to save them. There are two key issues you need to overcome. The first is to establish contact with the people down there, and second is to send them the spacesuits before the pathway leading down there is cleared.

"Regarding the first point, since it can't be solved using conventional human technology, how about trying out the new batch of Homo Evolutis? I'm referring to specifically the girl, Nian Xi Kong."

Ren Tao didn't go into details, but he could already see the different possible simulations assimilating in his mind. He could see the multitudes of simulacra his suggestion had set into motion. It was incredibly draining, and it made him yearn for a good munch or a short nap, but he continued with a toneless delivery,

"Regarding the second point, I believe you might have forgotten a special unit that can help you with that. If I'm not mistaken they are only on the Hope..."

"Another unit?" asked Yao Yuan curiously. He also noticed that the intervals between Ren Tao's yawns had gotten much closer, so much so that he realized the boy could barely keep his eyes open.

"The radioactive minerals harvesting unit... I noticed they

were using steam injectors and oil extractors in their harvest wells. If you could modify the pipeline to become air insulated, it could be used to create a direct tunnel into the third level which then can be used to transfer the spacesuits..."

Ren Tao could barely finish his sentence when he crumbled forward into Yao Yuan's alert arms. Yao Yuan quickly waved over several soldiers to help lift Ren Tao safely back onto the Hope.

Yao Yuan then broke into a surprised smile.

"Hope surveillance room, this is your captain. I need you to help me contact the person responsible for the radioactive mineral harvesting unit and the main engineer. At the same time, I want to you spread these enquiries among the Workshop and Academy...

"The possibility of adding an air insulation modification to the digging pipeline, and the complications that would come

from digging and lowering said pipeline from a vacuum environment into a non-vacuum one!

"I need the answers in 30 minutes!"

Chapter 84: 24 Hours (9)

Compared to the technicians in the underground base, the personnel assigned to radioactive ores mining duties were much more fortunate. This was especially true when one realized how better off this group of people were compared to the rest. For one, because the mining area wasn't attached to the underground base, it wasn't checked multiple times for structural safety. In other words, many mines collapsed during the initial earthquake. They couldn't withstand the

level 9 quake.

However, because most of the mining operation had been automated, all the workers were above ground maintaining upkeep of the machinery when the earthquake hit. They retreated back to The Hope with a miraculous 0 percent fatality rate.

When this group of people heard about Yao Yuan's inquiries, they gathered with the relevant experts to conduct discussions. With the aid of The

Hope's supercomputer, man's crowning technological marvel of the 21st century, their discussions were further hashed out with simulations.

Within 30 minutes, Yao Yuan received the necessary response. The rock layers around the base were too compromised for drilling was the general consensus. Disturbance to the earth crust might exacerbate its structural weakening and cause the base to collapse.

Instead, the experts offered an

alternative in small scale drilling. Even though cracks already appeared, the ground layers were still compact enough to support a contained drilling operation. As long as the operation did not extend beyond the stipulated 10 to 12 hours, the ground should hold.

The engineering team added that if the operation was assigned with their best tools and workers, they were confident an air-insulated chute could be built within the 10 hour limit.

"To conclude, it is entirely possible to transfer spacesuits to the third level citizens but the risk undertaken will be incredibly high because the operation alone would take about 10 hours?"

With great risks come great rewards. From his years of leading the Black Star unit, Yao Yuan knew the best result didn't come easily. His conscience had been blunted over the years as he sent his men into dangerous situations because it would contribute positively to the overall mission success. Yao Yuan was a great believer of

utilitarianism. He believed sometimes fatal concessions had to be made along the way to greatness...

Now, he had found himself again at such a crossroad. To risk losing more people to save the third level technicians, or to give them up to preserve what he already had...

Both choices had its own merits, and each had several thousand human lives hanging in the balance. Even by his standards, there was no obvious

choice. But, Yao Yuan knew this was to be his responsibility alone... it was the responsibility that he assumed when he picked up the mantle of leadership!

"...Get the drilling team ready within the next 30 minutes. Make sure they are packed with sufficient food and water because this is going to be a long battle. We will be working in 2 shifts, each for 5 hour. There will be no break in between, so I want everyone to be prepared mentally and physically. We have to finish this operation under 10 hours!" Without waiting for a response, Yao Yuan

cut off communication and sighed deeply.

(I've chosen. No matter the outcome, I've tried my best. Just like all the decisions that I've made before this... I will bear all the consequences that shall come!)

Under Yao Yuan's order, The Hope quickly went into motion. Members of this drilling team were treated with the best food and luxury items. But staring down possible doom had dampened many an appetite and

in the end, the team left with cafeteria with an absurd amount of food still piling on their plates.

At the same time, the remaining citizens were still lining up to go into The Hope. With only a few decontamination rooms available, waiting for tens of thousands of people to go through was going to take some time.

Witnessing this, Yao Yuan called for Guang Zhen, "Ol'

Wong, I want you to be in charge to maintain the order. Give the drilling team members clearance priority, but make sure the rest stay in their lines. I trust you'll be a good acting captain... Because I'm going to need to take a short nap, wake me up after 5 hours... Also, help me retrieve Jay and Zhang Heng from their post. Give them a hot meal and a new change of spacesuit. Tell them they have 5 hours to rest their eyes."

After that, without giving thought to where he was, Yao Yuan lay down on the floor and started to snore. Everyone else

present was dumbfounded by their captain's behavior but the acting captain quickly took over. Guang Zhen ordered a few soldiers to guard Yao Yuan's sleeping body as they waited patiently for their turn to get on The Hope.

Then Guang Zhen ordered others to reach out to Zhang Heng and Jay who was still in the underground base. With everything done, Guang Zhen stared at the people around him and thought...

(You've picked one long and hard battle, Ol' Cap'n...)

Despite the many worries complicating his mind, Yao Yuan entered deep REM sleep quickly because he had spent many of his military years training to do so. He knew he needed a completely refreshed state of mind to face what would come next.

As if his brain came with an internal clock, Yao Yuan woke up automatically after 5 hours. When he came to, he saw he had

already been stripped out of his spacesuit, laid out on a white bed and strung up on a glucose drip.

As per his usual habits, Yao Yuan spent his first waking moment surveying his surroundings. After making sure everything was safe, he spent less than a minute extricating the drip needle and getting dressed.

When he was ready, Yao Yuan stepped out of the room to run into a pair of Black Star close

guards who was standing by. Without hesitation, Yao Yuan asked, "Pass me a communicator. How long have I been asleep?"

Removing his own set of communicator, one of the guards replied, "Sir, you've been asleep for exactly 5 hours."

Nodding, Yao Yuan put on the communicator, "This is your captain. I need an update."

"... Yes, captain. This is The

Hope's main communication center. I will pass you over to the rescue operation headquarters now."

(Rescue operation headquarters?)

Yao Yuan was stunned by the unfamiliar term but he remained silent, guessing correctly that it was Guang Zhen's idea. Within that few seconds, he had come to seeing its purpose because things are easier accomplished in numbers.

Soon after, a voice came through his ear piece.

"Captain, everything on The Hope is going well so far. All the energy circuits, both updated and not, are in full capacity. We could lift off and space warp this moment if needs be...

Drilling in the underground base is at its second shift. They are 80 percent through the flooring, and modification for air insulation is being done as we speak. They will need another hour before

everything's complete...

About 60 percent of the machinery and supplies used and stored in the base has been retrieved back to The Hope. A team of 1200 soldiers was assigned on this salvaging detail...

According to the latest headcount, there are 42 confirmed deaths, 2 of them members of The Academy and 346 still remain in ICU, 9 of them members of The Academy...

We are still unclear about our astronomical location but surveillance has shown the asteroids within this solar system to be incredibly unstable influenced by the star's dramatic changes. Using data on the star's radioactive wavelengths, The Academy predicted the star's next big change will happen in the next 6 to 8 hours. The effect it will bring is unknown but possibly catastrophic. The Academy advises we leave this star system before then..."

Yao Yuan took some time to

digest the slew of information, before finally saying, "Contact the following persons to be ready to follow me down the base.

Zhang Heng, Jay, Xi Kong, and...

Ren Tao!"

It had been 12 hours and 10 minutes since the quake...

It would be another 11 hours to the collision with the shattered planet...

I added extra emphasis to the aspect of risk management which was absent in the original. It flows better with the overall story.

Chapter 85: Song for the Soul

Regarding the 4 people Yao Yuan named... Both Zhang Heng and Yao Yuan had long since been ready. After catching up on some precious sleep, they had been waiting for Yao Yuan to call on them. Even Ren Tao predicted he would be called so he wasn't at all shocked when the order arrived.

The only exception was the 17-year-old girl, Nian Kong. She stood timidly before Yao Yuan. Obviously uncomfortable in this

unfamiliar situation, she was as scared as a spooked rabbit.

This threw Yao Yuan for a loop. Due to his military background, he was used to dealing and negotiating with men like Jay and Zhang Heng... but an anxious little girl?

Yao Yuan cleared his throat and spoke in his kindest tone possible, "Xi Kong, hi, my name is Yao Yuan and I'm the captain of this ship. Please don't be afraid, you're not here because you did something wrong,

you're here because I need you."

Xi Kong was shocked being directly addressed by Yao Yuan. Turning red, she mumbled barely above a whisper, "So... sorry... This is the first time I'm meeting you so... I'm going to have to decline... Plus my parents will probably disagree..."

Hearing that, Yao Yuan slapped himself on his forehead, making Xi Kong jumped in shock, and chuckled lightly, "I might need to rephrase what I said. I mean I need you to follow me back to

the underground base. I... We need you, the people who are still trapped down there need you!"

The little misunderstanding made Xi Kong's almond-sized face burned even redder. She stole a glance at Yao Yuan who stared back at her with a straight face. She wished a hole would swallow her up right there and then. Finally, she nodded gingerly.

Just like that, escorted by 15 soldiers, the party of 4 took a

short-distance bus and sped towards the base.

Along the way, Yao Yuan kept asking Xi Kong about her power.

"...Actually I'm pretty much clueless about this power myself. I just know that every time I pick up my Gu Zheng or hum a note, my surrounding will get peacefully quiet like everyone and everything has fallen away, leaving only the empty cosmos as my stage," speaking from memory, Xi Kong continued, "it was a mysterious experience

seeing the cosmos stretch before me. Initially I was very afraid but as the melody came to me, these little orbs of light appeared around me, and I could feel the warmth coming off of them. There were in the beginning only 10 of them but slowly their number grew. They burn with varying intensity but there is always 1 in the middle which shines the brightest. As if guided by natural instinct, every orb gravitates towards it. I always feel safe bathed in its silvery glow..."

Here, Xi Kong stopped to look carefully at Yao Yuan. She

turned away shyly and continued, "I've tried communicating with these little orbs of light but trapped in their own world, my voice can find no way of reaching across. So I resorted to singing, and gradually my field of vision expanded... The cosmos isn't empty at all, it is filled with these little orbs... or rather singular sparks of light, and there are tens of thousands of them. It is as if I find myself immersed in a field of stars."

Even though it didn't show on his face, Yao Yuan was deeply intrigued by Xi Kong's

experience. When she took a pause, he urged, "And then? What else did you do?"

Staring at her feet, Xi Kong resumed her story, "As I've said, my attempts at communication, even turning to using all the languages that I know, had been to no avail. But my singing worked, and somehow when I sing, I feel less alone... And everyone crowds around me whenever I sing. They say I have a beautiful voice like I was singing with my soul."

(Singing? But sound waves need air to travel, and the chute is going to be insulated... No wait! I mustn't underestimate her ability as The Anima. I could also see the orbs of light but not the little sparks she mentioned so her mastery of the skill must be more powerful than I am.)

Ever since they left Planet Sahara, Yao Yuan had received confirmation regarding the existence of Homo Evolutis. In fact he had ordered a section of The Academy, which comprised of 10 scientists and over 50 lab assistants, to head a special group specifically dealing with

mystery of the Homo Evolutis.

Other than that, he himself also had been testing and trying to expand his powers.

In the several months after they left Planet Sahara, no matter how exhausted he was, Yao Yuan would still dedicate about 1 hour each day to practice his superhuman abilities.

He had gotten so familiar with the powers of the Perceptor, the Diviner and the Seeker that he

could use them at will. He had bypassed the necessary trigger of using imminent danger.

He had also been training his Whisperer power. However due to its passive nature, he hadn't had it under full control to be able to switch it on or off at will.

Lastly, there was Jay's Deceiver ability but it didn't appear like Yao Yuan had access to this power.

Thus far, of the recorded Homo

Evolutis, the majority was the Perceptor. Among them were Ebon, Lee, Liu Bai, and Fei Biao.

There was only one pure Seeker and that was Ying.

There were three known Diviners, Zhang Heng, Chou Yue and a random other who were attuned to prediction of danger.

The Whisperers were those could receive sudden inspiration when they were contemplating difficult questions. There were

two of them aboard The Hope,
Bo Li and Ivan.

Lastly, there was Jay, the sole
Deceiver.

As the All-rounder, Yao Yuan
was unique in the sense that he
had access to all the above
mentioned abilities, with the
exception of Jay's.

Nevertheless, on his low
moments, Yao Yuan couldn't
help but feel like a jacks of all
trades but master of none. It

might not be obvious now but he knew his malice detection wasn't as sharp as Ebon's, prediction of danger wasn't as accurate as Zhang Heng's, clarity of vision wasn't as clear as Ying's and now he knew his connection as the anima wasn't as profound as Xi Kong's... It was only a matter of time when his power would be no longer needed.

Yao Yuan mulled over this newfound type of Homo Evolutis, the Anima. He believed its power shouldn't be that simple. All the recorded superhuman abilities shown its first sign after The Hope left

Earth. So the simple deduction was that they were born out of human's adaption for survival in space. And since there was essentially no air in space, he believed The Anima's power went beyond reliance on sound waves.

With that in mind, Yao Yuan said, "Zhang Heng, Jay and Ren Tao, I want all of us to close our communication for 3 minutes. Xi Kong, would you please sing for us in the next 3 minutes? You can sing any song you like but don't tell us the title beforehand."

Yao Yuan was the first to switch off his communication, after some hesitation, Zhang Heng and Jay followed suit. Ren Tao though remained silent, staring blankly at the space before him. It was until Yao Yuan moved to give his space helmet a slap that he unwillingly joined the rest.

Xi Kong was suspicious of Yao Yuan's intention but she obeyed his order. Unable to sit facing Yao Yuan while she sang due to her extreme shyness, she moved her body away from the three men. When they saw the side of

her mouth moving, they knew Xi Kong had started singing.

(Hmm... I hear nothing. Have I been overthinking? Indeed, without the help of air, how could sound travel to our ear lobes and into our brain? It was physically impossible. I need to stop basing my judgments on science fiction...)

Yao Yuan sighed inwardly but when he moved to open his communication, he heard a sound.

No, instead of a sound, it was more like a signal or an emotion...

Blue shining like sapphire; Blue blinding like the sky and sea...

Blue, we shall no longer be...

When Yao Yuan came to next, he could feel wet tears flowing down his face. Hurriedly, he switched on his communicator and shook the other 3 out of their tearful reverie. As communication came back

online, Xi Kong's mellifluous voice poured forth...

Instead of singing, she was humming part of the melody from the Home Sonata. Circumventing the law of physics, Xi Kong had sung the desire for home right into the men's hearts.

"You can stop now, we can hear you perfectly. It was a song for the soul," finished Yao Yuan with a complicated expression.

Lyrics has been changed to maintain rhythm but here is the literal translation of the original lyrics:

It is a planet as blue as a gem,
blue sky, white clouds, deep sea,
land, green plants...

Everything is so warm, the
world before our eyes is so
gentle, this...

This is home!

Chapter 86: 24 Hours (10)

When Yao Yuan's group arrived at the base they met a salvage unit that was returning to The Hope.

They were tasked with reclaiming parts and apparatus from the anti-gravitational, life preservation as well as other machinery unit. Even though these parts could be reproduced but that would require another set of investment so to prevent wastage, all that could be saved were saved.

Throughout this evacuation operation, the short-distance bus became an unlikely asset. Initially intended for transportation of children, it had become the operation's most valuable mode of transportation. This was because it had a big capacity, an easy control, and a set of specially-designed tires that could grip the ground tightly. Furthermore, due to their lesson on Planet Sahara, it was also fitted with powerful engine that normally would be used for monster trucks!

Recognizing its potential especially in reforming supply lines, The Barracks claimed it as its main mode of transportation. Therefore, throughout the operation, the military had been jotting down its weaknesses in the hopes that improvement could be made in the future.

At this moment, a few such short-distances buses passed by Yao Yuan's group. They were loaded with materials salvaged from the underground base. The military escorts saluted and answered Yao Yuan's several simple questions before resuming their mission in a

hurry.

After that brief intermission, Yao Yuan led his team deeper into the base. When they reached the base's second level, Yao Yuan repeated to Xi Kong her mission, which was to transfer information from the second level to the third level.

The details of Xi Kong's mission though had undergone plenty of transformations as Yao Yuan learned more about her power. For example, Yao Yuan's initial plan was to send a detailed

instruction on how to build a simple communicator to the industrial level. But after finding out Xi Kong's method of communication was to form emotional connections via singing, that plan fell apart. How could one enunciate detailed instructions with only melodies? Yao Yuan also realized an inherent weakness that he had overlooked in his initial plan... Even if he could somehow outline the instructions for the third level people, without a single member of The Academy, the instructions would remain indecipherable.

Therefore, Xi Kong's original mission was canceled. Instead, it was changed to offering a source of comfort for the people down there. It was Yao Yuan's hope that her power would calm the people within especially when the digging got close enough to rock the third level.

It had been 13 hours since the initial quake. Yao Yuan predicted the crystal reactor's acid bath had been changed at least once, or worse, he feared they might have already used both sets of the available chemical potions. Compounding the situation was the fact that it

had been at least 10 hours since they had had outside communication. It was anyone's guess what the situation down there was. As the major, Yao Yuan had to prepare for the worst.

When Yao Yuan arrived at the second level field, the leader of the drilling unit accompanied by a few Black Star members hurriedly gathered around Yao Yuan. They quickly gave Yao Yuan a brief on the overall situation, focusing specifically on the digging progress.

"...Major, we're almost done with the drilling but there is a problem..." the leader said directly.

Handing Yao Yuan a chart of the digging site, he continued, "Drilling until now has been successful, all has been going according to plan. But now at the cusp of breaking into the third level, we've stumbled across a big problem..."

Studying the chart, Yao Yuan offered, "You mean one of the cracks has widened?"

The leader nodded solemnly, "Major, you are correct. A crack has widened between the rock layer in the middle of the second and third level. I'm afraid if we are to continue with the operation, vibrations from the drilling might widen the crack even further..."

Yao Yuan appraised the chart silently and called Zhang Heng over. He relayed the situation to Zhang Heng before adding, "There is no time for us to come up with another plan. We have to finish digging this tunnel.

This is our only hope for rescuing those people... So Zhang Heng, I'm banking all my faith on you because you will probably need to keep your power activated for more than several hours..."

"Major... Captain, I have nothing else going for me but this power, so don't you worry. I would die before I would let you down! I will not disappoint you... because I know I am nothing without this power." Zhang Heng saluted with a weak smile.

Yao Yuan patted Zhang Heng consolingly on his shoulder before moving away. As he crossed Zhang Heng's side, Zhang Heng could hear an uttered whisper.

"No, Zhang Heng, you still have us. As partners, The Black Star will always have your back."

"Continue drilling!"

He then assigned two close guards to Zhang Heng. As long as there were people to support

him, Zhang Heng Yao Yuan believed would be fine.

He stopped before Xi Kong, and said seriously, "Nian Xi Kong... Can I call you Kong?" to which the girl nodded shyly, "Kong, as you can see, the base itself is not entirely secure but know that there are about 3000 lives below us waiting for rescue. It is understandable that they would be afraid because they are running out of water, food and possibly even air. It is our responsibility to lend them a voice of hope...

Danger in space affects all of us but Kong, since you're not part of the military, I'm going to present you with a choice... You've heard the leader of the drill team yourself. Continuation of the operation might collapse the whole base due to the weakening of the geological structure.

So, here's the choice. You can return to The Hope now or you can stay to help the 3000 plus people... I want you to deliberate over your final decision because understand that your life hangs in the balance."

Xi Kong lifted her head lightly to sneak a glance at Yao Yuan. After that, she nodded firmly, "I... want to stay to help you."

Yao Yuan sighed in relief, "Then would you please kindly start singing? The one that makes you enter that quiet space. Try to aim your voice at the sparks of light below us because otherwise it might prove to be a bit distracting for the people working up here... because your voice is too beautiful. So please disconnect your communicator and only

direct your voice at the people down there, could you try that?

Also, would you sing songs that are hopeful or calming, and after that, songs about seeking communication... Hmm... that might be a bit too specific, perhaps sing about songs related to friendship or family, something that could hint at communication."

Xi Kong nodded hesitantly. After that, she cut off her communicator. She tried talking to Yao Yuan but he could only

see her lips move.

Yao Yuan enunciated his words slowly, trying to tell her that she could start singing now using the shapes of his mouth.

Xi Kong didn't launch into her song immediately, instead she closed her eyes to calm herself down. As she became increasingly still within, the stillness was reflected outwards. Eventually, the realm of reality fell away, leaving her buoying as an orb of light.

After that, more orbs appeared around her, the biggest among them was burning like a miniature star. Xi Kong involuntarily drifted closer to it, attracted by its warmth.

Soon after, beyond this constellation of orbs, little sparks of light emerged. A cluster of them huddled in a group not far away from her, but their glow was comparatively faint in contrast to the orbs around her. It was as if they would be wiped out by the slightest wind.

"Please don't be afraid, listen to my song. There are many people up there fighting tooth and nail for your survival, and most of all, there is him... He's here, he who promised he would die beside you, so...

Please do not be afraid, he will not turn his back on you!"

Amidst the steely silence, Xi Kong felt her spirit returning to that accident many years ago, the year where she came into that fateful contact with a blundering truck. She was only

10 then but she had spent 3 years in coma, singing to herself in consciousness and in spirit to ward off the deep anxiety and fear...

"Come join me in my song..."

It had been 14 hours since the quake when the drill bit finally broke through the third level.

It would require another 4 to 6 hours to construct the air-insulated chute necessary to let down resources like spacesuits,

communicator, and chemical
acids...

Chapter 87: Relentless Hope!

In the underground base' third level...

It had been more than 10 hours since the pathway between the second and third floor caved in. Thankfully, the life preservation system wasn't greatly affected by the disaster. However, even though the temperature and air continued to be properly maintained, it didn't take away from the devastation of being buried alive!

For better or for worse, since this was not the first time The Hope's citizen faced such despairing situation, they managed to wait patiently for rescue. They had faith that The Hope's government would not desert them!

Grounded by such a faith, the thousands of people calmly went about looking for possible cracks in the wall or still open pathways. Simultaneously, the technicians among them conducted a careful check-up, ensuring the life preservation,

air recycling and communication systems were well-functioning.

The result was regrettable because the cable for the communication system was found out to be irreversibly damaged during the quake. This meant that they had no means of communication with the outside world. And since there was no radio wave in outer space, common communicative devices like mobile phones were unusable, which was not a problem because there was an endless supply of landlines littering the base' 3 levels, and

not to mention, they were also equipped within each spacesuit. Sadly, they were all useless then.

Due to their lack of foresight, they had been effectively displaced from the bigger community...

Everyone's composure persisted for the initial several hours. People went about their way checking the acid base's concentration, the functionality of the various machineries, or just resting.

The mood shifted greatly 10 hours in, when the last set of chemical potion was added to the crystal reactor.

It was hard to understate the importance of this crystal reactor. It was responsible to power the base' life preservation system, its death meant the death of 3000 plus people.

Admittedly, that was an exaggerated worry because the enclosed pocket of air could ironically stretch the trapped citizens' survivability, but what

about the alien plant?

Granted the plants posed no harm directly to humans but they would make easy work of the base' overall structure. If the plants ate through the base wall, exposure to the vacuum would doom them all!

In other words, when the chemical bath lost its effectiveness 8 hours later... that would be their time to face death!

Gradually, obvious expressions of despair started to manifest. People got either increasingly agitated or placid. Some sauntered about instigating fights while others sat to a side and started writing their wills on their clothes. A few soldiers even started sleeping.

Mark Norse, the father of 2 sons opted for neither!

He was not going to give up because his wife and 2 sons still awaited his return on The Hope! He was going to be a survivor to

see his loving family's faces again!

He refused to lie down and die just like that. His family deserved better!

That was why Mark had been going about the place looking for salvageable parts ever since 2 hours ago. Spotting the increasing roll of wirings in Mark's hands, several of his colleagues joined him in the search.

"...yes, I intend to build a rudimentary wireless communicator," Mark revealed to his friends, "there are however 2 issues. One, there is no suitable parts around. This level is mainly used for constructing factory-scale parts like attachments to the external cabin so it is hard to find small components that are used in electrical devices.

"Secondly, it's the structure of this base. Do you know why the base is not fitted with wireless communicators? The answer is actually very simple. This meteorite contains deposits of

radioactive minerals, this much is common knowledge. It might even contain minerals that could no longer be found on Earth. In any case, the radioactive waves of these minerals would interfere with radio waves.

In fact I believe this interference is constant with regards to the communicators on The Hope and within the spacesuits. But, they are usually too weak to pose any trouble to such powerful devices."

Mark shrugged disconsolately,

"Wireless communicators, on the other hand, because it is not part of the future-tech ensemble are not stable enough to withstand interferences from these waves. Therefore, usage of landlines is more reliable... under normal circumstances that is.

The device that I'm trying to build could reach around 500 to 1000 meters without interference. Sadly, while we're trapped here, it has only a 100 to 200 meters range of communication..."

Mark turned to face the group around him with a weak smile, "that distance though could still bring us into contact with the people above us... We will know if it's truly time to despair after I've finished building this communicator."

"How long would this take?" A middle-aged man asked, "We don't mind trying, but..."

He pointed somewhere far away, "I don't think that bunch of people are willing to wait."

He was pointing at a group of people who had been gathering at the end of the caved in pathway, chipping away at the stoppage. Eager to do something, these people were working off their inner upheaval by moving fallen rocks and pushing over boulders. As time moved on, their progress gained traction as more people joined in. Unfortunately, the aggression wasn't always directed at the rocks. 3 altercations had already broken out. It was only a matter of time before... one would see blood.

Mark shook his head helplessly

and turned back to check the materials that they had gathered, "We still don't have enough ingredients to build a communicator. According to our current progress, we would need another 3 hours."

"Then let's hurry and split up. Hopefully that'll buy us some time. If necessary, dismantle the machinery and even the shuttle, what use would these serve if all of us were to die?" the middle-aged man clapped his hand and announced.

Everyone continued their search with renewed vigor.

3 hours later, when the materials were adequately assembled and Mark started building the communicator, trouble ensued.

The group that had been digging at the pathway by then had grown to about 2000 plus in size, and about 10 of them surrounded Mark's group. One of them yelled, "You people had been scavenging around the area like rats and for what? For a

dumb communicator that has at most a 200 meters range! Are you kidding me?!

Give it up already! There is no longer anyone other than ourselves that are trapped in this base! It has been 14 hours since the earthquake and we have not seen or heard any signs of help coming from above. Do you hear any sounds of digging? Cause I don't! They must have left for The Hope already! Tell me, what's the use of your communicator then?

Stop what you're doing and come help us! With all of us pitching in, I guarantee you, we will be able to get out of this place on our own!"

The person's order gathered support among the people around him and Mark watched all this unfold with a sinking feeling in his gut. They hadn't resorted to grabbing his project or smashing the materials but he knew these people were not far away from that mob mentality. The inherent threat was obvious, either join them or suffer their wrath.

"Everyone, please listen to me. The pathway is completely blocked by the cave in. Without tools or explosives, it is impossible for us to leave. Even if we have explosives here, I would suggest against using it. What if it causes more collapse? The reason we are building this communicator is because..." began Mark in a loud and clear voice. He was slowly convincing the crowd to his perspective but...

His group was still the minority!

"Smash their stuff! They will have to help us then!"

Screamed the man as he rushed towards Mark's communicator, and he was followed by a few howling men. There was a blind rage burning in their eyes...

Mark closed his eyes in defeat. He knew it would be futile to stand in the way. In fact, it might even make things worse. These people could no longer be reasoned with. They were out for blood...

(So, is this the end?)

Suddenly, with the man's foot hovering threateningly over the communicator, a song drifted into the area...

A calming and hopeful song, one that spoke of faith and rescue...

And it came from...

All 3000 plus people, including the raging mob stopped and lifted their head to stare at the ceiling.

Yes, it was true. The song came from the second floor!

Chapter 88: Will you Trust me?

The song had an instant calming effect on its listeners. As a matter of fact, some men in the crowd started to openly weep. To regain a lost hope, that would appear to be the last straw that broke the camel's back, and their accumulated fear and anxiety flowed out in form of tears.

Nervously retrieving his outstretched leg, the shamed man uttered, "I'm sorry, I lost my... I'm sorry. I've lost my

composure and sanity because of fear for a moment there. So... sorry..." He then slowly crumbled to the ground, shuddering in tears.

Sighing, Mark surveyed the extent of damage. Luckily, the communicator wasn't irreparably damaged. After some repairs, he would need another hour to complete the construction.

"Everyone please help me find the necessary tools!" Mark yelled without hesitation as he

continued to work on the communicator.

Rallied by Mark's order, the crowd dispersed to look for possible parts. A small group even gathered around Mark, serving at his beck and call. Whenever he needed a component, they quickly handed one over. This sped up the progress tremendously and the product was finished under an hour.

A sizeable crowd gathered around Mark as he moved to put

the communicator to the test. There was a sustained excitement and people had hope glinting in their eyes, waiting for response to come from the other end of the communicator...

"Hello, can you hear me? Is this the second level? Hello, is anyone there?" Mark said carefully, as he fine-tuned the frequency.

"...Yes, I hear you! Major, we just received a voice transmission from the third floor! Hello, this is the rescue

unit. Please hold, the major is coming!"

Despair is, by definition, an absence of hope. An example was when man knew an asteroid was hurtling towards Earth, and they had no escape, that was despairing.

Thus, when hope was injected into the situation, feelings of despair would itself gradually dismantle. Case in point, when news came from the rescue unit, despair surrounding the crowd immediately dissolved. Serenity

fell over the crowd as they moved calmly away from the cave in and lied down on the floor to rest and sleep.

Yao Yuan was overjoyed to receive communication from the industrial level. He wasn't expecting someone down there to construct a makeshift communicator but it was a welcomed boon. Things were made a lot easier with 2-way communication. For example, if the technicians down there could help build the air-insulated shuttle on their end, the manufacturing speed would be cut down by at least half an

hour!

30 minutes! It might seem inconsequential but it was not a number to scoff at. The difference of 1 minute could save 3000 lives, much less 30 minutes?!

"Move! People, move!" Yao Yuan shouted with unbridled joy at the group of workers around him.

Fueled by the elation from establishing contact with their

fellow citizens, the workers poured more effort into their work. Renewed energy could be heard in the multi-lingual affirmative response they replied Yao Yuan in.

Nevertheless, it must be understood that they were on a race against time, and their opponent was not one that was known to slack...

It had been 17 hours since the quake and the chute was 2/3 ready. It was 1 and a half hour away from completion.

However, the acid bath in the third floor had reached critical condition. It could only hold for another 10 minutes before the plant within went berserk.

When Yao Yuan received this news, he marched over the Jay's side. Without a word, he sat down on a fallen boulder beside Jay. In the silence that followed, Yao Yuan even unconsciously went searching for his pack of smoke before realizing they were both wearing their spacesuits.

"...It has reached the critical stage, right?" Jay asked with a released breath.

Yao Yuan nodded his head in confirmation, "We have at most 10 minutes. I have the third level people be on close monitor of the plant, you still can rest for a while longer."

"That's fine. I would like to do some warm-ups just in case you want me to enter that state again within like 10 seconds. I'm not going through that again without preparation," Jay said as

he lifted himself up from the boulder.

Yao Yuan opened his mouth to say something but he stopped himself. He only patted Jay on his shoulder before moving towards the work site.

Suddenly, Jay's voice came through his communicator, "Yao Yuan, you know full well that I'm a conman... I've conned for money, for benefits, for status, and if the feelings suit me, for fun. In fact you've seen through my act the first time you laid

your eyes on me. So why do you still trust me?"

"This is about Planet Sahara right?" Yao Yuan replied without turning, but his every word fell heavily on Jay's heart.

"No one is born a conman, and nobody aspires to be one, but life often pushes one down a certain lane... It is not my place or anyone's place to judge where life leads us... Plus, Jay, there are many things one could say about a man who graciously offered to help a woman who doesn't have

much to repay him gather water. You could say he's dumb, or maybe he's horny, but one thing you couldn't say is that...

He's a conman. He has nothing to con from this woman, it's not logical to say so."

At that point, Yao Yuan turned around and even though he stood a distance away, he stared Jay right in his eyes, "Jay, you are a man of your words... Your past and your memory don't define you, your power as the deceiver doesn't define you. In

fact, it offers you the freedom to lie and thus puts you above the need to deceive! Jay, I will not fault you the failure of this mission because it is not your prerogative but mine, but remember that I do not see you as a conman!"

After Yao Yuan walked away, under the shadows of Jay's space helmet, a blithe smile broke.

"Is this what it feels like to be trusted? That idiot..."

After that exchange, Jay felt exceptionally calm, so calm that he could feel the conman label that had haunted him all his life peeling away...

"Okay, it's time to put this silver tongue to use. Come, alien plant, it's time to meet your maker!"

Jay chuckled darkly to himself before closing his eyes in meditation. He entered the mysterious state easily... That came as a shock to even Jay himself because he had been trying and failing to do so for

the past few days.

Light orbs of varying intensity and size appeared around him. One of them was at least 10 times bigger than the rest and it glowed intensely.

(No, not these, the plants should be much lower...)

As Jay trained his focus downwards, slowly but surely, pinpricks of light appeared in a crowded cluster... and they radiated an eerie green glow!

(There you are... Now, you naïve plants, it's time to succumb to my art of lying...)

As time trudged on, concentration of the acid bath in the crystal reactor moved closer and closer to the critical stage. A sense of anxiety permeated not only the third floor residents but also the mining workers and technicians. Even the military was not free from its chilling effect, and their overall progress gradually slowed.

Yao Yuan wasn't going to hurry them because he too was lying in wait...

(I need to make a decision now! Either evacuate the mining party now to minimize fatality or wait for Jay to succeed and hope for the best!)

"This... this is unbelievable! Major, the acid bath's concentration is stabilizing! It's teetering near but not crossing the critical line! This is a miracle! the crystal reactor is still working! Has God heard our

prayers?"

The message that came from the industrial level was greeted with a spirited cheer. Everyone resumed their work with fresh vitality...

"God? No, it's a man..." uttered a sighing Ren Tao as he stared perplexed at Jay who still had his eyes closed.

"No, it's a hero."

Came Yao Yuan's voice.

"A hero who we can place our trust in."

Chapter 89: Believe!

Xiao Chen sat quietly to a corner of the room. If not for her quivering lips, she could easily pass as taking a rest...

But, it was true that she was shaking in fear due to her mild claustrophobia.

In her past, she would do all she can to keep her space open, and this was true for both when she was living in her tent and in her modest residence. The Hope

had a record low criminal rate so she was not particularly afraid to leave the door open.

Even before that, when she was still sharing an apartment with her friends, the windows in the room would always be wide open, and that had landed her into multiple altercations with her roommates.

This was all thanks to the memory that had been haunting her since she was 9...

Hiding under the bed, she bit her tongue tightly despite her parents' blood that was seeping through the mattress. When the police arrived 2 days later, they found an unmoving little girl caked in her parents' fresh blood curling into herself...

Months before that, her mother had had an affair with a professional conman. During their pillow talks, her mother unsuspectingly shared her father's company secrets with the man. The man instead repaid her with AIDS. Her family was thrown into dysfunction when her father's

company faced bankruptcy and when he received his own health reports for AIDS. He confronted his wife and in throes of despair, shot his wife before turning his gun on himself.

This traumatic experience became part of her life. As she grew older, she heard between family gossips that the conman was a translator for a French financial company. After that, she poured her heart and soul into pursuing an education in France and picking up the tricks for being a translator...

A cheer not far away pulled Xiao Chen out of her reverie. She stared vacantly at the crowd of people before finally getting up to ask a person near her what was happening.

"Haven't you heard? It's a miracle! Just when the acid bath was going to cross its limit, it stopped, but somehow the crystal reactor is still functioning! Yes, even without exhausting the acid bath, it's still working! Thank God, it must be He who is looking over us!" exclaimed the middle-aged man.

(God?! No, not God. It's that liar...)

Xiao Chen lifted her head upwards and swore she could somehow instinctively locate the spot Jay had planted himself as he started utilizing his powers...

(Humph! So what? He's still a conman! I'd rather die than forgive him!)

Xiao Chen returned to her previous spot in a fit of rage. She knew her anger was

unreasonable but if asked, she would say...

"Even his power is to deceive! It's little wonder that he's a liar!"

Of course this was all unknown to Jay who was in full concentration on the second level. As time passed, he got increasingly familiar with the ins and outs of his power.

He realized the key to activating his power was focus. Contrary to what many believed,

it had nothing to do with his physical condition, being alarmed or relaxed was totally unnecessary. In other words, if he could maintain a sharp focus, his power could be activated in the middle of a fight. Therefore, Jay slowly slumped himself down the boulder, preserving his energy for what would be an extended affair.

(How long could I hold? 30 minutes? 1 hour? 1 hour and 30 minutes? Or... until I die?)

With his eyes still closed, Jay

chuckled bitterly to himself. He wore an incredulous smirk.

(This is certainly unexpected, a hero's departure... Those that I've conned must have cursed me aplenty. Their wish is going to come true but I bet they weren't wishing for such a gallant death. How ironic.)

The air-insulation operation finally entered its final stage. After the third level technicians finished installing the parts on their end, the first batch of supplies could be dropped. After

that, it was just a matter of figuring out a way to clear a pathway and transport everyone back to The Hope.

However, it would still take at least 20 minutes to finish this final touch...

At this moment, Jay was already breaking out in cold sweat. He had been lying to the plants for more than 1 hour. That had gone way beyond the critical limit for any Homo Evolutis and it was evidenced by Jay's conditions. He could barely

keep himself awake and he realized he would instantly fall asleep if he ever let his guard down. To prevent himself from drifting off... he had been biting his upper and lower lips.

Yao Yuan noticed the blood flowing down Jay's chin but what could he do? Order him to keep going even though it might harm his life?

Yao Yuan was not above making necessary sacrifices, but to have others die for his own safety, that he couldn't do! He

understood life was precious, so he was always careful when it came to decisions like this.

As the leader, he would be the first to die for the majority. But to push others to their deaths so that his life could be preserved, that was to him the very definition of cowardice!

Therefore, even if it involved thousands of lives, he would not order Jay to challenge death. It was not his or anyone's place to do so!

Unexpectedly, Jay opened his eyes and waved Yao Yuan over. Without waiting for Yao Yuan to come close, he said, "I want to talk to Feng Xiao Chen."

Sighing, Yao Yuan nodded a soldier over, informing him to contact the third level. Then he sat down beside Jay, listening quietly to the man's labored breathing.

Then, Ying's voice came through the communicator.

"Yao Yuan, request for private conversation," Ying said.

After switching over to a private channel, Ying continued, "Yao Yuan, we can't allow him to talk to anyone else. If he could hold for another 20 minutes, the mission will be successful. This conversation will only be a distraction for his already drained mind and the repercussion could be devastating..."

Yao Yuan responded firmly, "I will not allow anyone to

interfere with his decision to talk to Xiao Chen, even though it might fail us all... He has done everything that he could do, and I will not hold him responsible to anything else!"

After a long silence, Ying replied, "You're the captain... If that's your decision then I shall obey."

Yao Yuan nodded, "Then continue with the original plan, and ensure the project is continued until completion. Try to speed up the progress by

cutting corners, now is not the time to be picky about quality. After it's done, make sure to lower the batch of chemical potions first!"

Xiao Chen's discontented voice wafted into Jay's ear, "Giant liar... Is that you? What do you need me for, you liar?"

Jay felt comforted hearing her voice. He laughed lightly but that only worked to highlight the gravel in his voice. It required tremendous strength for him to even speak but still,

he chatted nonchalantly with Xiao Chen, "Chen... Do you hate liars that much?"

"Yes, I hate them with a passion!" Xiao Chen screeched with a slight tremble, "I hate conmen the most! They con others' feelings and heart, they are the worst scum! They should all just die!"

"Is that so? Your wish might just as well come true today..."

Jay chuckled slightly before

adding, "Chen, how about we make a deal? If you survive, you'll stop referring me as a giant liar, how about that?"

"In... your dreams!" Xiao Chen could barely mask the tremble in her voice then. Even Jay, in half his mind, could pick it up clearly.

"I will not suffer being saved by a giant liar!"

"That will simply not do..."

A rare smile blossomed on Jay's face. In that instant, it was as if all his energy had been restored as color rushed back to his face. With his face burning pink, Jay roared loudly, "Chen, will you believe this?"

"Believe what?" Xiao Chen asked with a quiver.

"Believe...

"Believe that a giant liar will do

everything to save you, would you believe that...?"

Jay shut off the communicator before Xiao Chen could respond. By then, blood was already pouring freely out of his ears and nose but it didn't seem to faze him in any way. Jay only sat there laughing dumbly to himself...

20 minutes later, the chute was completed. The chemical potions were successfully lowered and added into the acid pool...

30 minutes later, an unconscious Jay was pushed into surgery...

50 minutes later, Jay was officially announced to be brain dead...

At the same time, swept by a sudden overwhelming grief, Xiao Chen, who was in the middle of putting on her spacesuit, started bawling like a child...

Chapter 90: One Last Gamble!

"Leave both of them behind!"

Yao Yuan turned back to look at the two wounded agents with a steely gaze. Not part of the Black Star unit, they were members of an additional unit attached to his mission. Their help had been instrumental to the mission success but unfortunately, two of them had been mortally wounded by stray bullets.

"But we're in the middle of the enemy's camp. And this is a covert operation, if they were to fall into enemy hands..." a recently-rescued government official said hurriedly.

"You're right. The information they have is too valuable..."

Retrieving a silencer, Yao Yuan leaned into one of the agent. He whispered into his ear, "This is for the benefits of the majority. I'm sorry but please rest well. If luck would have it, maybe I'll see you soon..."

A crimson blossom bloomed in the air following a violent shock...

Memories of his past operations as the leader of the Black Star unit suddenly flashed through Yao Yuan's mind...

"Captain, captain?!"

The voice pulled Yao Yuan back into reality.

Realizing the sound came from his communicator, he quickly responded, "yes, any update?"

"This is the latest report, captain. The crew has finished building the air-insulated chute, and transportation for 3421 sets of spacesuits has been completed. Currently, everyone down in the third floor has their own pair of spacesuit but to be safe, an extra 100 pair is provided," replied the voice.

"That's good news. Then, we

shall move on the plan's second stage. Immediately escort the mining crew back to The Hope. We have to be fast so only take the handy equipment and leave the stationary ones," ordered Yao Yuan.

"Yes, sir. Captain's order..."

Under the military's guidance, the technicians, scientists and workers on the second floor were quickly corralled out the underground base and into The Hope. A mixture of fear and astonishment swept through the

crowd when they passed through the base entrance because the cracks on the wall were already as numerous as a spidery web. The fact that it still remained standing was in itself a scientific anomaly.

"What's next..." Yao Yuan turned his attention to the people around him. Present were most of the Black Star unit, black-star guards, normal soldiers and Ren Tao, the only civilian.

Before Yao Yuan could put forth

his decision, Liu Bai interjected, "Yao Yuan, it's my advice that you take a rest. Similarly, Zhang Heng also need to rest!"

Yao Yuan stared dumbfounded at Liu Bai before turning to Zhang Heng.

Only then he realized the pink blush that suffused Zhang Heng's face. He looked not unlike Jay moments before he fell. Zhang Heng had been keeping his power on for more than several hours, beginning from the start of the drilling to

the completion of the insulated chute. Other than Jay, Zhang Heng's contribution was not to be overlooked in the success of this mission.

Even though the strain of using a passive superhuman power was less demanding than an active one, it was clear that Zhang Heng had reached his very limit.

In fact, the same could be said of Yao Yuan himself. He had been using his own set of powers since the moment they stepped

foot once more into the underground base.

Shaking his head at Liu Bai, he added, "Don't worry, I can still carry on... I know my body well so I won't harm myself purposely, but Zhang Heng... Zhang Heng, you are allowed to go back to The Hope if you want. You've given us your best."

Mimicking Yao Yuan, Zhang Heng shook his head, "We're already at the last step of the rescue mission, how could I leave now? Plus, I can still hold

on..."

"...Alright, make sure that you hang on," Yao Yuan said after a short silence.

Turning to address everyone, Yao Yuan continued, "According to the original plan, the last step is to tunnel a way through but due to time restriction, we only have one option left... and that is rely on explosives."

"But that sadly will not work!"

"...it won't work."

The moment the word 'explosives' was issued both Zhang Heng and Yao Yuan expressed their disapproval.

Sharing a meaningful look with Zhang Heng, Yao Yuan added, "Both our power tell us, if we were to use explosive, the only result it will lead to is the collapse of the whole base. Then, not only will all the people down there in the third level die, our lives will also be in

danger, so this solution has to be vetoed."

Turning to face Ren Tao, Yao Yuan said, "Now, it's your turn to shine, the thinker among the Homo Evolutis. Ren Tao, tell me, what shall we do next?"

"The thinker, huh? A fitting name if I do say so myself, but sadly... I'm no magician, I can't pull the perfect solution out of thin air," Ren Tao stated helplessly.

Contrary to his belief, none of the people harassed him for his failure but they merely looked at him solemnly. Shrugging, he said, "Yes, I don't have the power to save them, but perhaps you guys do... Okay, if you could get me the tomogram of the fractured rock layer, then maybe there's still hope for these people."

"A tomogram?"

As Yao Yuan repeated the unfamiliar noun, he entered a quiet state where clues and

inferences slowly fell into place...

"I understand, indeed, this is the only answer."

Yao Yuan contacted The Hope to request for the tomogram, specifically focusing on the places where there had been cracks and fractures.

"The plan is surprisingly simple..."

Pointing at the caved-in pathway, Yao Yuan continued, "First, we need to give up on that pathway because it is not the most efficient line of action. Human's inability to fly means that all the pathways connecting levels of varying elevation are built at an inclination. In other words, it will be faster to create a new perpendicular pathway than slowly blasting our way through the prebuilt pathway."

While waiting for The Hope to beam over the tomogram, Yao Yuan continued with his explanation.

"As I've mentioned before, this line of movement is unconventional and impractical due to human's natural limitation. Furthermore, we have to content with the possibility of collapse in this situation. And even if the tunnel would hold, how would we transport the thousands of people up? Pull them up with a trolley? It is definitely impossible to pull them one by one. We do not have the time or the supply.

However, Ren Tao had provided

us with a solution that might work because it is in itself impractical, one that makes use of our unique disadvantages, and that is...

Procedural demolition!

Using contained explosion, we could manipulate the collapse to our advantage. Using strategically placed explosives, we could create a natural inclination from the fallen debris. Thankfully, the base's surface area is big enough for the inclination to not be at an

absolute 90 degree. However, make no mistake that the explosion have to be contained. Spread out too wide and the base will not be able to support the multiple weakening of its structure...

It seems improbable but this is the only way...

The only way available to save these 3000 people!"

Right then, the fax machine's light blinked. Rushing to it, Yao

Yuan wasted no time to look over the graphs that were spat out.

He then waved Wa Luo over and handed the graphs over, adding, "Form a team with Zhang Heng and a few other black-star guards. Cooperate between the two of you to decide where to set up the bombs and the quantity needed. You'll handle half the bombs...

...And I'll take the rest.

Everyone else return to The Hope this instance! If we're not there in the next 30 minutes, I want the ship to space-warp immediately because the rescue mission has failed...

In that scenario, Wong Guang Zhen will be the next captain. He will lead The Hope."

Chapter 91: A Speedy Warp

Since it was the captain's order, there was no refutation.

Barely a moment had passed before the team separated into two to set up the explosives. Using the tomogram as a guide, the explosives were set at the rock layer's weakest points.

The location and quantity would normally be carefully calculated, but due to the lack of

time, they had to depend on Yao Yuan's and Wa Luo's instincts and experience. There were only two possible outcomes: either the rescue would be a success... or they would all perish.

"...Is this decision correct? No sane person would bet on such a small margin of success; is this truly worth it...?"

Yao Yuan asked himself repeatedly, but there was no clear answer. Finally, his tired mind pushed the question out of his head to focus solely on the

setting the explosives.

"...No, this can't be put here. It'll damage the geological foundation too much," a mysterious voice warned Yao Yuan as he prepared to bury a set of explosives.

Without hesitation, Yao Yuan removed the half-buried explosive. Turning to look at Wa Luo and Zhang Heng at the other end of the room, he exhaled in relief.

It was undeniable that the mission was too demanding for the even the best explosives expert. To have a calculation down to such precision within 30 minutes where the multitudes of explosion would create a natural slope was, in a word, inhuman.

Thankfully, Yao Yuan had on their side...

The Diviners!

The Diviner's power of

foresight came in handy in predicting the rocks' falling patterns following the explosion. Success of the mission hinged heavily on this unique group of Homo Evolutis!

"...You can't put the bombs there, it's too dangerous," Zhang Heng uttered weakly.

Stopping in mid action, Wa Luo mumbled, with a hint of impatience, "You've stopped me from employing my bombs at multiple locations. Aren't you afraid that the total force won't

be strong enough to knock the floor out?"

Zhang Heng turned his focus to the floor and replied, in between labored breaths, "Don't worry, it's definitely more than enough. The base currently is barely standing on its own. A whisper of the wind could knock it down. If you go overboard with the explosives, it will instead bring the whole base down."

Weighing the explosives in his hands, Wa Luo shrugged. "Fine, you're the Diviner, so we'll

follow your instinct..."

Zhang Heng nodded before slumping to the ground. He could barely hang on to his thread of consciousness, and his every waking moment was an uphill battle against exhaustion... The long explanation he gave drained him of his last store of strength!

"Don't fall asleep."

A woman's voice came through his communicator. Zhang Heng

unconsciously turned towards the source of the voice and saw two female black-star guards standing behind him. One of them was the one who spoke to him.

Zhang Heng was so out of it that he couldn't even see the lady's face clearly. He smiled with much effort. "Why are the two of you still here?"

"The captain wanted us to stay to protect you. The rest of the Black Star Unit can fend for themselves, but you can't... We

will be responsible for carrying you back to the Hope during the final evacuation," replied the same woman.

"Okay." By then, Zhang Heng was barely holding on to reality, and out of the depths of his mind came his reply. "That's cool. When you bring me back to the apartment, remember to keep the windows closed. The gang on third floor likes to sing karaoke in the middle of the night, and trust me, they aren't actual singers..."

"Do not fall asleep!" the woman replied, with sternness in her voice. "You'll be the next Jay if you fall asleep. We'll get you hooked to the medicine when we reach the Hope, so please do not fall asleep until then."

"...But I'm so tired..." Suddenly, as if shocked, Zhang Heng turned towards Wa Luo's direction and yelled, "Not there! Find another location!"

Wa Luo sighed and once more removed the explosive.

Still hanging on to the two female guards, Zhang Heng seemed to freshen up a little. He added flirtatiously, "Right, I'm no longer living in the apartment. In fact, there are no longer parents, no more school, no more Earth... But... I have to say, you have a lovely voice. How about this, I'll trade you a LV handbag for a peck on the cheek."

The two ladies looked at one another and stayed quiet. It wasn't until Zhang Heng started to nod off that one of said hurriedly said, "Alright, fine. If you promise to not fall asleep,

I'll kiss you on the cheek."

"Okay, I have your word now! I must say... This pack of pills is hella powerful, but I'll come get you when I'm slightly more awake. Pretty lady, if you look as pretty as your voice, I guarantee you I'll give you the world. Do you know what my father is...?"

Zhang Heng continued to mumble in his feverish state. Suddenly, the two guards lifted him up from behind and started to run. Leaning into their support, Zhang Heng

the highest components in the hierarchy of basic human drives. Hanging on to the girl's promise of a kiss, Zhang Heng latched onto his shred of consciousness. In a way, he had had plenty of experience dealing with this twilight sensation of drifting in and out of existence. It was not entirely unlike his pill-popping days.

Before Zhang Heng could further embarrass himself, a violent tremor shook the floor. Carried forward by the force, Zhang Heng was sent flying before hitting sharply against the floor. As a screen of darkness

fell before his mind, he could hear...

"Do not sleep! Please do not fall asleep!"

"Zhang Heng, can you hear me? Tell me what number I'm showing!"

"...Major, it's too dangerous to administer analeptic. It might react too wildly with his Homo Evolutis power, and he's currently too weak to handle that..."

"...Quick! His heart stopped! Bring me the defibrillators!"

"...That was too dangerous, but thankfully he survived. We managed to pull him back right before he over-exerted himself. If we were 1 or 2 minutes late, he'd end up like Jay..."

"...No idea, Major. The machine shows that he is still asleep. Yes, we are certain that he is not brain-dead. His bodily functions are all fine..."

"Zhang Heng, here is your promised kiss..."

"...Thank you for saving my brother that was trapped in the third level. I have nothing else to repay you but this kiss..."

Zhang Heng opened his eyes to be greeted by a warm glow. It took him quite some time to realize that he was lying atop a sickbed. Not far away from him was a female nurse who was reading. Spotting her, Zhang Heng said, "Could you pass me a

glass of water? Thanks."

He was shocked by his own voice, which had gone uncharacteristically hoarse. Nevertheless, he was not the sole shocked party in the room. After staring blankly at one another for quite some time, the nurse exclaimed, with a surprised cheer, "Lieutenant Zhang Heng, I'm glad to see that you're awake. I would advise against drinking water since you've been abed for such a long time. Wait here, I'll go get the doctor."

Before long, a group of five or six doctors and nurses rushed into the room. The leading doctor was a dignified 50 year-old practitioner. A few iris checks and multiple cognitive tests later, the doctor breathed a sigh of relief. "Lieutenant Zhang Heng, I've informed the Major of your awakening. I believe he'll be here soon. Please do take the time to rest some more, you're still too weak..."

Zhang Heng hurriedly asked, "Doctor, how long have I been asleep?"

"...One and a half months."

"Yes, the doctor wasn't lying. You've been asleep for one and a half months, or more specifically, one month and 18 days..."

Yao Yuan said as he wheeled Zhang Heng to the fifth floor Barracks.

"The explosives mission in the underground base was a success. Thanks to your power, everything went according to

plan and about 2,800 lives were saved..." continued Yao Yuan.

"2800?" Zhang Heng asked curiously. "Weren't there 3,000 plus people trapped down there?"

"...A few hundred people was crushed by the falling debris," sighed Yao Yuan. "But thankfully, against all odds, most survived. And it was all thanks to you."

Blushing slightly, Zhang Heng

added, "Please don't put me on a pedestal. I know where I stand, and I'm not as important as you make it out to be. There are others who deserve greater credit, like Jay..." Zhang Heng's voice petered to a silence and Yao Yuan wasn't keen to pick up the conversation.

There had been a more detailed diagnosis on Jay. He was still in vegetative state... but not completely brain dead.

The functions of his main cerebral lobes had all but ceased,

but his minor lobes and pituitary glands still showed occasional responses. Nevertheless, every few hours, Jay's electrophysiological monitor recorded subtle activity, thus preventing brain atrophy, and that had puzzled the doctors the most...

Therefore, the diagnosis was "not completely brain dead." The monitor normally recorded zero activity, and Jay had remained in coma ever since he was transported onto the Hope.

When Zhang Heng was still at the hospital, he had paid his comrade a visit. Even though they hadn't known each other for long, they had formed a deep bond ever since their adventure on Planet Sahara... When Zhang Heng was there, he stumbled into Xiao Chen, the girl that Jay had a crush on. She too had survived the underground base. After returning to the Hope, she applied for a move to a small residential area near the hospital so that she could come to give Jay his daily dry bath and body massage... The proud smile on her face when she went through her daily exercise was not unlike one a wife gives her husband.

In fact, the whole thing reminded Zhang Heng too much of Planet Sahara... but sadly, this time he returned alone.

After a long silence, Yao Yuan said, "In any case, you've returned once more as a hero..."

Zhang Heng laughed lightly. Scratching his head, he asked, "Right, I've heard **others refer to you as Lieutenant Colonel**. Is that true?"

"Yup, I've given myself a promotion." Yao Yuan sometimes made a joke. "Even though many things happened on the meteorite base, it's undeniable that it brought immense wealth to the Hope. We can space warp more than 400 times, and we are stocked with enough supply to last almost 40 years in space! Plus, we will not have to worry about side effects during warp. This is all thanks to our stop at the meteorite base.

"Many have contributed to this success, and therefore promotions and rewards had to

be meted out accordingly. So, I've become a Lieutenant Colonel and now we have a lot more second lieutenants and new recruits. You're going to report as a military instructor when you recover."

Zhang Heng added bashfully, "Stop toying with me. I know where I stand. It's more likely that they will be my instructors... By the way, in the period I've been asleep, how many times has the Hope warped? Did we stumble into any interesting galaxy or planet?"

Yao Yuan stopped the wheelchair suddenly and a weird expression crossed his face. He then directed Zhang Heng's wheelchair down a different direction, saying, "We've warped 12 times since the meteorite base. The Hope stays for three days to observe the area we're in every time we warp. This is to map out the cosmos using familiar constellations so that we can revisit the area in the future when the technology's available."

Zhang Heng nodded, but as the

math added up in his head, he asked, "Wait, I've been asleep for one month and 18 days, right? Why have there only been 12 warps? Did we run into any trouble during the last warp?"

"No, there's nothing like that. This area we're in is a cosmic void. We're staying here longer than usual because..."

They arrived at one of the corridors that had windows that opened into outer space. Leaning ahead, Zhang Heng was surprised to see...

"Your eyes aren't lying. This area is indeed a void, because records show that there are indeed no planets, stars, or anything of the like. But there is, however, this..."

Yao Yuan too turned towards where Zhang Heng was looking and excitement lit up in his eyes!

"A landfill for alien spaceships..."

"A tens of thousands meters wide space where aliens deposit their broken spaceship carcasses!"

The Chinese military ranking system doesn't have an actual equivalency in the English language. The translator has been mixed up by the author's use of two words that are supposed to refer to two different rankings. They are supposed to be lieutenant and second lieutenant but have been treated as one and the same. The difference doesn't alter the plot much; it's only important in minor ways. For example, in this chapter, Zhang Heng got

promoted from second lieutenant to lieutenant while the translator has been treating Zhang Heng already as a lieutenant. I apologize for the mistake.

Chapter 92: An Intergalactic Spaceship Junkyard!

The Hope had made 11 warps since it left the meteorite base.

They stayed for three days each time for the purposes of cartography and observation.

However, they were quick to realize that it was an exercise in futility... because the cosmos was simply too vast!

Furthermore, it was always undulating. It was a map that would never be fully drawn.

There were too many planets, galaxies, nebulas...

The cosmos was indescribably humongous! The common analogy of it being the great River Nile failed to capture the scope of its actual size.

The gravity of the situation

slowly descended on the citizens of the Hope following each warp. It made them feel... increasingly and devastatingly dwarfed.

On the third day of the eleventh warp...

"...Negative, negative,
negative!"

A small group of scientists was going over the latest satellite surveillance pictures. One of them angrily repeated as he

slammed his hand on the table, "Still negative! There is no familiar intergalactic landmark around us. In what fresh hell have we landed in this time? Are we still in the Milky Way? Who can really tell?"

A senior scientist in the group wanted to ignore his junior's outburst but still said consolingly, "Let's not jump into conclusions. First, we are still too unfamiliar with how the space-warping technology operates. Refuting our previous theory of it being a wormhole, the Hope doesn't travel the way light does during warp. The fact

that it can transpose such a large quantity of mass with such a low energy cost is in itself a scientific miracle."

Here, the senior scientist lifted his eye to look directly at his pugnacious junior. "That is the reason why we are doing this. It might seem inconsequential now, but our current effort is building a foundation that will ultimately help to uncover the mystery of the cosmos. Two years ago, space traveling for us human was a dream. Do you really expect us to know everything there is to know about space in such a short

time?

"It would behoove you to learn a little patience, young lad. Practicing science is not a short sprint, it's a marathon. Yes, talent is important, but patience is the key that makes or breaks a discovery. There might be several missteps along the way, but remember that the spirit of science lies in trial-and-error... Without error, the institution of science would truly be dead. Learn to appreciate the opportunity around us. There are many things that elude our understanding, but isn't that the perfect chance for us to learn?

What is the theory behind space-warping? Is it completely random, could its destination ever be manipulated? Questions surrounding the very existence of the alien plant and the atomic level reactions it has to create energy crystals. These are questions that await answers.

"So don't fret, young lad. We've gained far more compared to what we've lost. If we can't achieve the necessary breakthroughs in this lifetime, there are always the generations after that. We are not inherently weaker than other alien civilizations, what we're missing

is... experience."

The senior scientist smiled.
"And aren't we working to mend exactly that?"

At the same time, Yao Yuan was rehabilitating to life back on the Hope.

It has been 32 days since their warp away from the meteorite base and he had spent every single one of them handling the remedial issues from that excursion.

First was the issue with death...

According to the logistics, there were 623 deaths in total, most of them lost during the blast that cleared the third level. Others died during the initial earthquake, while the rest died in surgery... The number 623 was not counting Jay.

It was a loss that was comparable to the one on Planet Sahara. After the necessary funeral arrangements were made, the Hope came across an

associated problem. Many families had lost their sole breadwinners because the men, those that died in the base's industrial level, were also the ones keeping their families financially afloat.

In other words, the problem was much more complicated than expected. The issue of familial compensation alone could tear his mind apart.

Yao Yuan stood up from his chair and stretched his tired body after a long meeting with

another grieving family. After cracking his joints, he turned to his secretary, Barbie, and asked,

"Have the latest post-warp surveillance reports arrived? The next warp is scheduled at 12 AM tomorrow, so do send me the reports if you have them... Also, help me brew a pot of tea, and make it thick; I suspect this is going to be a long night."

Fiddling with her pair of glasses, Barbie replied, "The report is not here yet. According to the usual protocol, it will

arrive right before dawn, which will be 24 hours before the next scheduled warp. Should I go rush them? About the tea... we've run out of the tea leaves that I normally use. Do you want me to go get some more from the quartermaster?"

After giving it some thought, Yao Yuan smiled lightly. "Never mind, there's no need to rush. It's only three or four hours till dawn... Also, our stock of luxury items will be running low until the next month when the external cabin's ready, so it's not wise to mess with the inventory until then. Could you help me

fix a cup of coffee instead? We still have a few packs left, right?"

Barbie smiled in reply as she stood. "Okay, a cup of strong coffee coming up... But Captain, I'd rather you take this rare lull in your schedule to take some rest. Issues like death gratuity payments need time and careful planning. Be too lenient and people will take advantage of it, but if you're too strict the government will come across as heartless. This will be a drawn-out battle."

"Yes, you're right."

Yao Yuan sighed as he watched Barbie leave the room. He sat back down and resumed perusing the rest of the document. Time unceremoniously passed until he noticed the smell of roasted coffee beans enveloping the room. He lifted his eyes to see Barbie smiling in return as she handed him the cup of coffee...

As dawn broke, the warp report came as expected. It was, for the most part, similar to the ones

that preceded it, a summary on the various intergalactic entities around them. It was one of the better ones that heralded much good news, or rather, not as much bad news.

Speaking of which, the report on the seventh warp had everyone breaking out in cold sweat...

That warp brought the Hope to a location where there was no star within several hundred light years of distance, the closest one being tens of thousands of light

years away. The Academy suspected that they were in between galaxies, like the space between the Milky Way and the Andromeda Galaxy. It was a whole empty stretch of nothing!

Thankfully, future warps after that had been much more fruitful. Even though the Hope did not land exactly in a stellar system, they were not that far away.

After these 11 warps, the Academy had come up with an observation. The Hope's space

warping system followed its own set of rules and it had plenty to do with gravity.

In other words, the destination of the warp would be a spot where gravitational force was present.

They based that on math. If the warp was completely random, the Hope would end up in the empty space between galaxies about 99 percent of the time, following the space distribution ratio. However, reality had proven otherwise.

Therefore, it was highly likely that the warp system followed a rule that decided that the warping destination would be close to a gravity source. Of course, for human standards, hundreds of light years could not be considered close, but for the alien civilization that created the technology, it might be akin to a short drive.

All in all, it was an impressive find. At least they now knew something of the mysterious space-tech that governed their lives.

A statement provided by the Academy when they learned how to manipulate the alien plant was forever emblazoned in Yao Yuan's heart. Compared to other alien race, humans were not lacking in intelligence but in experience. In the grand scheme of things, the ragtag bunch of human survivors was similar to babies.

But who could say these babies would not grow up to become geniuses?

Therefore, even though faced with the unnerving unknown of space, Yao Yuan was not worried. His main focus was to collect supplies in between warps and to improve their technology so that one day they would have a crystal reactor big enough to allow for an infinite numbers of warps.

As long as man still has a breath left in him, there remains hope for mankind. The future will always be an unknown, so no one could firmly say that there is no hope awaiting man in the future.

With that forward vision in mind, the Hope initiated its twelfth warp...

At 3 am the next morning, with Yao Yuan having just lain down to sleep an hour ago, a series of knocks fell on his door. It was immediately followed by the beeping from the communicator he left on his bedside table. He sprung up from bed ready for battle, assuming wrongly that an uprising had happened...

The few soldiers that gathered

outside his door relayed this information...

The Hope's surveillance room, after multiple probes using a super-grade space telescope and military grade photography equipment, had confirmed...

That two months' journey away from the Hope was a large area about tens of thousands meters in size. It was a junkyard filled with spaceship carcasses!

Chapter 93: Difference!

Reports of the discovery were spread among all the known Homo Evolutis at 3 AM that day itself. Members of the Academy also received similar updates.

Two months 12 days and 6 hours, give or take 5 minutes, away from the Hope was the spaceship junkyard. It was thanks to the ship's powerful central mainframe that the time could be so precise.

By early 22nd century, man had invented a camera that could capture high definition photos at a distance as far as the distance separating Earth and Mars. Using a similarly powered camera, the Hope managed to capture pictures that displayed the airship carcasses' rough outline.

According to these pictures, the metallic carcasses formed a unique "asteroid belt" that spanned tens of thousands of meters. It could be seen so clearly in lightless space because the bigger pieces among them gave out an eerie glow.

Some of these pieces, according to initial calculation, were three to five times bigger than the Hope. This was true at least volume-wise. Granted the Hope was longer than these broken pieces of debris, but even at about several tens of meters long, they possessed considerable size.

"...Here is the report on our latest discovery. Let me remind everyone that this set of pictures and data are top confidential documents. If there is any leak before the information is

declassified, the parties involved will be brought to trial before military court. There will be no due process." Yao Yuan opened the meeting with a warning, a warning that was well heeded.

Reclaiming his seat at the head of the table, Yao Yuan continued, "Now that we have that out of the way, let's continue. I apologize for waking everyone up in the middle of the night, but it can't be helped. We're facing a situation that dwarfs all previous warp findings. I'm pretty sure you've heard the rumors before arriving.

"Yes, they are real. There is a junkyard, an alien spaceship junkyard."

Yao Yuan said, pointing at one of the pictures, "This photo here shows a section of this vast junkyard. It would appear that none of the spaceships are intact. The smallest among them are as small as several centimeters while the bigger ones are larger than this ship.

"I'm no scientist, nor an academician, or even an intern,

and that is why you all are here today..."

Yao Yuan addressed the room in a serious tone. "First, I want to know how advanced these spaceships are compared to our current technology. Is it in terms of decades, centuries, or millennia?

"Secondly, I want to know whether there are still usable ships among this junkyard. I'm not talking about ships that we could occupy and use, but rather..." Here Yao Yuan

swallowed before clarifying, "... is it possible for some hostile alien race to still operate these ships to attack us!? This is the most important question. I want an answer in the next 24 hours because that will be the time I decide whether it is beneficial for us to continue space-warping.

"Last but not least is the question regarding this junkyard's origin. A landfill this size doesn't appear out of nowhere. I want to know where these carcasses come from, do they float here from somewhere else, or were they destroyed

here, and if so, why? Was it an intergalactic disaster, planetary implosion, or..."

A gloom fell over Yao Yuan's face as he enunciated the words. "An attack from another alien civilization!?"

"These are the questions that I need answered. Report back as soon as possible. This is not a request, this is an order."

Standing up, he added, "I will await the report in the

surveillance room as I have to keep an eye out for new developments. Feel free to utilize all the resources you need. Human resources, we don't have much, but supplies, thankfully we have in spades.

"Alright, meeting's over. Remember, ladies and gentlemen, humanity's future might very well depend on this!"

And Yao Yuan wasn't exaggerating when he said so... for the statement was further confirmed by the report that

awaited him in the surveillance room.

Because there was no issue of wind-caused erosion in space, certain objects could be perfectly preserved for millions of years. Using the mainframe's reconstruction software, the bigger pieces of debris were remodeled into their original form by manipulating their locations, shapes, and directions.

The result revealed... a magnificent space battleship!

In fact, the oval-shaped creation was so big that it could barely be called a spaceship! It was, more appropriately, a planet!

It was obvious that this 1400-kilometer big manmade planet was a command center because arranged in a circle around it were hundreds of flat, pancake-shaped warships.

This fleet of space battalions was oppressing, and the pressure from the size of its

giant command center alone could take man's breath away... They were created with a level of technology that was way beyond man's comprehension!

This fleet would take one month, no, probably only one week to totally demolish man's solar system. Of course, man would most likely surrender before that. If the alien overlords promised not to completely wipe out the human race, there would be an over 90 percent chance that man would surrender within days... especially after realizing man's best weapon, which was that of

the atomic kind, was useless against such a wildly superior race.

Looking at the reconstructed monstrosity, Yao Yuan was further convinced of his previous statement. This piece of space junkyard was immeasurably important to human survival! The discoveries that they could glean from it could easily bypass those provided by the alien plants!

To use a simple analogy, the technology behind the alien

plant was like magic, elusive but still understandable. It might take multiple generations of the Academy for man to even start understanding the theories behind it. In that way, it was very much similar to the space-warp technology.

This junkyard, on the other hand... would take several hundred generations of scientific analysis to even break its surface. If the plants were like magic, this would be like myth, illogical and incomprehensible.

Thus, gaining even a smidgen of knowledge about it would drastically improve the Hope's scientific level. For example, understanding the carcasses' metallic carapace would cause man's metalworking technology to improve by leaps and bounds.

The possibility of breakthroughs was endless, particularly in the fields of telecommunication, space-used internal combustion engines, surveillance devices, and even weaponry... Of course, as mentioned above, blundering blindly into it would not work, but with enough time, the

research could be compartmentalized into simpler groups, each breaking down the project into smaller parts to analyze. With the accumulation of findings over the years, Yao Yuan believed they could fully grasp the technologies that made up this wasted battleship!

(After the Academy clears the junkyard of danger, we will have to start dissecting and learning their technology... This much must be done!) Yao Yuan balled up his hands firmly. So determined was his focus that he didn't notice his fingernails had pierced so fiercely into the ball

of his palm that it had started to bleed.

It was seven in the morning and multiple groups of scientists were still in the middle of their calculations, arguments, and observations. The importance of this junkyard was not lost on them, because a majority of them shared Yao Yuan's vision. In fact, it was this shared vision that kept them going through the night, confronting each other with bloodshot eyes.

Breakfast was served at 8 AM,

and that was also when Yao Yuan received his first report, a report on this reconstructed battleship's technological level.

"Based on our current observation, calculations from the central mainframe, and scientific analysis...

"Their technology is at least 200 to 300 years more advanced than ours, and this has already taken into account the scientific renaissance that will happen on the Hope.

"We've agreed on this number because of two major reasons. One is its size. It would require an incredibly powerful engine to move a fleet this size, and this technology alone bypasses our current technology by at least 200 years...

"The good news is that their technology is not thousands of years away from where we are. And why we say so is the second reason. The civilization responsible for this creation doesn't appear to have access to space-warping technology or even light-travelling technology. As a matter of fact, we don't

believe they have the basic anti-gravitational systems, and evidence shows that they rely on circular shapes in their engineering and construction to balance out the forces of gravity. Therefore, both their central command and battle carriers are circular or oval. It is through the usage of centrifugal force that balance is maintained...

Thus, to repeat, it is our expert opinion that this battalion of spaceships is about 200 to 300 years more advanced than us humans..."

Chapter 94: Advance and Trial

"...After several days of careful observations and detailed discussions, we came to the conclusion that there is no intact spaceship in the junkyard. Carriers in need of support are prone to releasing electromagnetic signals at regular intervals, and thankfully, we have not intercepted such a signal from the junkyard."

Yao Yuan elaborated as he pushed Zhang Heng forward,

"That is why after multiple debates, it has been decided that the Hope should head towards the junkyard. And so far, we're 15 days into the journey. On a related note, the junkyard's existence has been discovered by the public about 10 days ago. Many were already suspicious when the Hope hadn't space-warped after the usual three days. The fact that the junkyard keeps giving out shards of light doesn't really help the situation either. Previously, you would need a telescope to notice it, but now it's viewable with the naked eye alone. Needless to say, the confidential clause has been resolved since almost everyone on the Hope is currently busy

discussing the junkyard."

Zhang Heng wasn't mentally there as evidenced by the fact that he kept turning back to stare out the window with a blank look in his eyes. It wasn't until Yao Yuan smacked him heavily on his shoulders that he woke with a jolt and announced excitedly, "Wow! Alien civilization and alien spaceships! Is this real? Are we sure it's not some kind of mirage?"

Yao Yuan laughed lightly. "You can't have mirages in space, so

this is real... Or rather, most of it doesn't appear to be illusory under the scrutiny of our discreet probing. Of course, your worry is shared among some of the scientists, saying that the junkyard is nothing more than a masterful trap conjured up by some advanced alien culture to trick technology-wise backwards societies like our own, but this line of thought lacks validity."

Zhang Heng turned around and asked, "Why not?"

"Because there is a lack of pay

off." Yao Yuan smiled. "It is my belief that there is an intention for profit behind every one of our actions, and it should be the same for all alien life forms as well. Be it for survival, the claiming of territory, or assault, there has to be a profitable purpose behind it, right?

"We humans are no threat to their survival or territory, so the safest bet would be assault. Perhaps they view us as a possible future threat and would like to vanquish us before then. However, there is still a problem. Why would they set a trap for us in the middle of

nowhere? This area is literally a void as there is with no star or planets around, so if this is a trap, where's the bait? What are the chances that we would cross here willingly?

"Hence, this argument lacks validity. We are looking at a spaceship junkyard, nothing more nothing less!" Yao Yuan concluded, with the smile still attached to his face.

Zhang Heng debated for quite some time before laughing cheerfully. "Then that's great.

Looks like there is a bright future awaiting man after all... But then again, as you've said, these spaceships are several hundreds of years more advanced than us, so... why are they lying around in broken shreds?"

The question had both Zhang Heng and Yao Yuan descend into silence because the possibility was too scary to be spoken out loud... In fact, lots of scientists had been debating this issue since the junkyard was first spotted. According to the captured pictures, all of the debris in the junkyard was

similar to the ones that made up the central command battleship. In other words, there were no parts that were of a different origin.

With that in mind, the Academy came up with two hypotheses. One, there was an internal uprising. This was not hard to envision since the Hope itself had almost succumbed to this ending when they were dangerously close to running out of supplies. Of course, the infighting could also be caused by a difference in religious or political ideals, and to have a mutiny escalated to such

devastation was not entirely impossible... Then again, the command battleship alone was at least 1,000 kilometers long, so it could survive easily for several thousands of years in space. As long as the society wasn't overly populated, it was hard to see the people voluntarily hurting their own chance at survival, so the possibility for hypothesis one was quite low.

And that left them with the much scarier hypothesis two, one that made chills run down Yao Yuan's spine.

The fleet of battleships came into contact with a far superior alien race, and in the midst of combat... no, the massacre, the battleship was demolished without its opponent suffering even one warship loss... Of course, it was possible that for such an advanced civilization, they didn't even need to rely on warships for the purpose of warfare.

In any case, the idea that this battleship fleet that was already 200 to 300 years more superior than human technology could be wiped out without a chance of retaliation was... spine-

chilling... Because one could already imagine how man would fare when they came into contact with this powerful adversary.

Man's ingenuity in cruelty was unrivaled as evidenced by the inhuman experiments done on lab animals, so they knew clearly what would be their ending if the roles were swapped when they were captured by these alien overlords... Thoughts of that had Yao Yuan shivering, so he promised, "We will make the technology in this junkyard our own!"

And that was the perspective he presented to the Hope's public, a perspective that was not accepted by the more cautious parties on the ship. However, the majority was behind Yao Yuan's back. In any case, this had sparked a new wave of dialogue on the Hope.

Nevertheless, for better or for worse, all would be revealed in two months, when they arrive at the junkyard.

10 minutes later, Zhang Heng,

with Yao Yuan's aid, finally arrived at his home, where a bunch of people already sat waiting. There were members of the Black Star Unit, newly promoted second lieutenants that were there beside him in the underground base for the rescue mission, Ning Xue, Mao Miao, and a reluctant Ren Tao, whom Chou Yue had dragged there by his ear.

Zhang Heng looked around and with tears pricking his eyes and smiled. "I don't think my house can fit so many people, so how about a meal at the restaurant? My treat..."

Yao Yuan clapped him tightly in his shoulder, interjecting, "This is your welcome home party, so keep your offer until next time! Come, I've made reservations at the Barracks Restaurant. We're going to have a toast... a toast for having successfully completed our mission."

"Cheers!"

"Yes! I'm not leaving there sober!"

"Zhang Heng, I'm going to stuff you full with food and wine to help you make up for lost time..."

Zhang Heng felt a warm feeling suffuse through his body cocooned within the cacophony of familiar voices. However, he still turned left and then right as if looking for someone, and that prompted Yao Yuan to ask, "What's wrong? Did we miss someone?"

Whereupon Zhang Heng answered, "...No, everyone's

here, let's not waste time anymore." And he made to catch up with Ebon.

(So she isn't here... But didn't she promise... Did I imagine everything?) Simultaneously, in a slightly large room that had been converted into a courtroom, a sizeable crowd had gathered. The courtroom was one of the three courtrooms currently available on the Hope. About ten thousand citizens wandered in its vicinity, some waiting for their turn to be called into court, others talking among themselves. Interspersed within the crowd were also

several reporters interviewing the public about the ongoing trial.

Yes, court was in session. It had attracted such a crowd because it was the first time the Hope was sitting over... A 'Crimes against Humanity' trial!

This all started when the underground base' black box was unearthed. On it was the recording of the mob led by a group of workers harassing Mark, the engineer, and then threatening to destroy his

communicator.

During the final evacuation, the soldiers stationed in the third level grabbed hold of the black box with the intention of preserving confidential information and the data backlog. They didn't expect their action to lead to such a monumental court case.

To be fair, the group of workers didn't violate many laws, plus no one was hurt, and the communicator was unharmed in the end. If this was a case on

Earth, it would be tossed out by the court almost immediately.

But circumstances were different now. Many citizens and even soldiers demanded proper repercussions. This was because most of the Hope had been spurned by mobs that had lost their grasp on sanity in the face of pressure and despair. Their experience during the final days of Earth had told them that the most dangerous creature of all was a crazed man.

And that was the biggest threat

to the Hope's safety. Without a sense of order, the Hope's security could easily be dismantled from within. No one on the Hope was willing to relive Earth's dark few months, and that was why protocols had been put in place by the military and upheld by the public so that such tragedy would not repeat.

Therefore, the group of workers was immediately charged by the soldiers, hoping Yao Yuan would persecute them under martial law.

However, when the news reached the House of Representatives, they pooled their resources to appeal to Yao Yuan to hand over the workers to the civil court. Their justifications were, one, the accused weren't members of the Barracks, and two, they hoped an open court proceedings in the civil court could set a precedent for members of the public to know to uphold order at all times.

After sitting through multiple viewings of the recordings, Yao Yuan decided to pass the trial over to the civil court.

And today was the trial for Marcian Nikopov, the person who initiated and led the mob.

The defendant for the Hope's first 'Crimes against Humanity' trial!

Chapter 95: Trial and Test Flight

When Yao Yuan returned from Zhang Heng's welcome back party, he realized that Barbie had left him reports on the day's trial in his room. It was a report that detailed the first day proceedings of the Hope's first trial on 'Crimes against Humanity'.

It was a given that the case was going to have an extended trial, but Yao Yuan could already predict the result... It was unlikely that the death penalty

would be served. The reason why the House of Representatives requested the trial be had in the civil court was that they didn't want the Hope to have a bloody precedent for such cases. It reflected the citizens' fear of the government being tyrannical, and Yao Yuan understood that fully.

Even though multiple instances had shown that having a democratic process may not be 100 percent conducive for survival, the people of the Hope preferred the separation of power between the military and the political sides. The Hope

relied on a firm and tight leadership to see the light of another day when it came across dire situations, but in the grand scheme of things, how often would they come across such situations? Therefore, most of the time, they preferred the Hope be run by a consensus of the majority, because then everyone would have a say in the discussion. As long as there was no ridiculous legislative amendments, Yao Yuan also felt that this was the perfect mode of governing for the Hope.

Because of that, the citizens had a fairly conventional approach

to the punishment that should be meted out against the defendants on trial, and the representatives they elected shared the same view.

Yao Yuan sighed in relief after skimming the report. Even though the result of the trial hadn't been concluded, he was sure the defendant would at most face 20 years of incarceration. In fact, he believed that the defendant would be acquitted of "Crimes against Humanity" and be charged for assault and battery or destruction of public property instead, since with the "Crimes

against Humanity" charge being dropped, the court would be able to skirt around the death penalty.

To be perfectly honest, even though the trial had grabbed hold of the entire ship's attention, it was a minor distraction for Yao Yuan. He was more concerned with the junkyard the Hope was heading towards.

"Thankfully, Zhang Heng has woken up. His presence will help the upcoming exploration

immensely. The problem now is... Jay."

Yao Yuan sighed inwardly, but he wasted no time to linger on the subject. After his night rituals, he undressed and climbed into his bed. 10 seconds later, his breath stabilized as he fell into a deep slumber.

Early next morning, Zhang Heng, escorted by several nurses and a doctor, arrived at the rehabilitation center. He was there at his doctor's behest. The injuries he suffered had been

predominantly mental, but since the brain and the body were inextricably linked, they had manifested themselves as physical complications. Thankfully, they weren't serious, and his doctor believed that Zhang Heng would make a full recovery after 15 visits to the rehabilitation center.

To his surprise, Zhang Heng met one of his old friends at the center. It was Ebon, the Black Star Unit's own heavy gunner.

It was not shocking to find

Ebon there, since he spent two hours at the center daily ever since he was fitted with a mechanical leg designed by a group of Japanese and American electrical engineers. The mechanical leg returned to him the simple mobility he had lost from the amputation on Planet Sahara, but he was no longer as agile as he once was.

As a soldier and a member of the Black Star Unit, that was a weakness that he would not allow himself. A leg that might trip him over during missions, that was unacceptable!

Therefore, Ebon had been trying his best to familiarize himself with his new leg. He still had some ways to go before he would reach his original agility, but he was already speedier than normal recruits. In fact, if Ebon didn't lift up his trousers, no one would suspect he had a mechanical prosthetic.

"Come on, Zhang Heng, man up! Stop hanging on to the nurses like you're their baby. If I can do this on my own, surely you can too," teased Ebon, in his signature booming voice when

he saw Zhang Heng come into the room. He slapped the machine beside him, indicating to Zhang Heng that he should try walking there himself.

Hearing that, Zhang Heng reluctantly released himself from the nurses' hold, but as soon as he did so, he felt the floor giving away under him, and one second later, he found himself kissing it. Thankfully, the soft, corkwood flooring softened most of the fall. Ebon waved away the nurses that came forward to help as he walked over to Zhang Heng. Extending his hand, Ebon said,

"Get off the floor, it's not the time to sleep. The boss is afraid you'll be like this, so he has ordered me to keep an eye on you. You're not going to slack in my presence. Come, let's get to work."

Zhang Heng was thus forced into a training routine by the two-meter-tall personal trainer. Before long, as he got into the rhythm, he managed to even find enjoyment in the pain, reminding him of his previous military training days. At noon, Zhang Heng was so wasted that he had to be dragged to the canteen by Ebon.

As both men wolfed down their lunches, Zhang Heng suddenly asked, "Ebon, do you remember the two close guards that escorted me back to the ship?"

"If I'm not mistaken, it was a man and a woman. The rest I'm not so sure. Why?" Ebon replied, after taking a thoughtful bite of his food.

Zhang Heng could feel heat rising on his face, but he replied as nonchalantly as he could. "It's nothing important, I just want

to thank them personally for saving my life."

"Nonsense," said Ebon as he smacked Zhang Heng heavily on his soldier. "According to your logic, then wouldn't the whole ship-worth of people, including myself, need to line up to thank you personally because you've technically saved all of us? Nonsense, it was their mission to escort you back to the Hope. They would've faced punishment if they had failed to do so! You're a soldier, don't be so sentimental!"

Zhang Heng could only repeatedly nod his head and agree, because he would rather die than reveal his true intention to Ebon. Even though they would trust each other with their lives, certain sentiments were not meant to be shared amongst men.

Furthermore... (Ebon is a known blabbermouth. Telling him is similar to telling the whole ship. Where would I hide my face then?) Zhang Heng frowned deeply, and the food he kept shoveling into his mouth to keep up the appearance started to gain the consistency of bland

paste... (Wait, I can remember hazily her thanking me for saving her brother that was trapped in the third floor. Perhaps that's the way to go.) Zhang Heng knew that it was easier for him to go and look through the close guards' database than doing it the roundabout way. After all, there were almost 2,000 survivors from the third level, and most of them were male, but there were only 200 Black Star close guards, and among them was less than 40 females.

There was, however, one obstacle that stood in the way.

Zhang Heng had been part of the Black Star Unit for almost a year, so he was privy to the existence of a pair of prying eyes that lurked within the ranks of Black Star Unit... A member of the Black Star Unit himself, the pair of eyes reported directly to Yao Yuan. Even though its existence was common knowledge, no one knew of his actual identity, Zhang Heng suspected that not even Guang Zhen knew who this person was. Maybe the person was Guang Zhen himself, or Ying, or Ebon, or even someone who had passed away on Planet Sahara.

Therefore, even though Zhang Heng could use his rank as a lieutenant to go through the required database, he would be instantly found out by Yao Yuan... It was true that he would not be committing anything illegal, but for a security-sensitive body like the military, his transgression would be hard to explain.

(After all, I just want to thank her personally. It's better not to involve anyone else...) With that awareness in mind, a plan slowly formed. No one would think twice if he went through the files of non-military personnel.

Furthermore, with his position as the lieutenant, that could be easily done. He just needed to find an opportune time... With a plan at the ready, Zhang Heng rejoined Ebon to clean up the rest of the food.

While Zhang Heng was recovering at rehabilitation, the trial on "Crimes against Humanity" came to a close. It was as Yao Yuan expected, neither charges of "Crimes against Humanity" nor assault and battery stuck.

In the end, the defendant was sentenced to five years in prison for crimes against public security and the destruction of public property. As for the rest of his gang, some got acquitted and others got one or two years of jail time.

Reporters who got the trial's firsthand news quickly returned to the newsroom where the trio of Xiao Niao, Qiu Qiu, and Dan Dan already sat waiting.

"Finally, it's over. I'm going to miss it though because thanks to

it, the sales for the papers has been great," said Qiu Qiu as he read the sales report with a cigarette dangling from his lips.

On the other side of the table, munching on snacks, Dan Dan sighed. "That's true. Sadly, the sales number is most probably to going drop back down."

"No, no, no," teased Xiao Niao after he took a deep draught of his cigar. Holding a similar sales report, he added, "There will be more stories if we go out to find them. We're in the news

business, aren't we? Sitting here is not going to help us get anything done. Plus, did you two forget about our new roles?"

His friends looked at one another before asking in unison, "What new roles? Millionaires?"

"No, we're the government's spokesperson, or rather, its official media outlet,"

Flicking the report in his hand, Xiao Niao added, "And as the media, we have to be in tune

with the public's psychology. Haven't they been talking about the spaceship junkyard? So let's write stories on that...

"Plus, aren't they going to perform test flights on the shuttles that will later be used to explore the junkyard within the next few days?

"Report that!"

Chapter 96: Homo Evolutis Faction

Initially, the Hope was working to upgrade two shuttles, but one of them was buried alongside the underground base when the earthquake hit the meteorite. Therefore, in total, the Hope only had one upgraded space shuttle and another un-upgraded one.

The upgraded shuttle could now fire small-sized and medium-sized missiles and was armed with automatic cannons that could do quick work of large

spaceships. Furthermore, its energy circuit was upgraded to include an energy storage system that could help it maintain a 60 percent longer flight time. The energy circuit was upgraded using the superconductor materials provided by the alien plant.

Without overhauling its internal combustion engines, its speed and mobility had remained unchanged, but even at that stage, it was already a product that stood at the forefront of humans' technological advancement. However, all these projects were

additive in the sense that they didn't involve the shuttles' internal engines, which were still beyond man's comprehension.

In other words, toying with attachments was the extent of the upgrades that the Hope could perform on this shuttle. The Hope's scientific acumen had to be stronger before more core upgrades could be done.

And that was why it was heading towards the spaceship junkyard!

The upgraded shuttle's test pilots were unanimously selected to be Ying and Lee. Both of them were Homo Evolutis, Ying being a seeker and Lee a preceptor. As safety precautions, the team of test pilots originally included two diviners, Zhang Heng and Chou Yue, but since Zhang Heng was still in rehabilitation, he was exempted.

Chou Yue, on the other hand, was still in basic training. With a prima donna attitude that befitted her surname, Chou Yue's training regime had been

dragged on to a stage where everyone was positive it was never going to end. In one of her running practices, she constantly requested for rest because the temperature was too hot. Finally losing his temper, her commanding officer chided her, asking how the temperature could be too hot when the Hope had its temperature regulated at 20 degrees Celsius. To which she famously replied, "Running makes your body temperature rise, right? And since the external temperature is, as you said, regulated, this means total in total, my temperature has had a net gain. And with that, I repeat, it's too hot to run."

Because she was a preteen girl and a diviner that was only slightly less powerful than Zhang Heng, no one dared defy her. The fact that she was also an important member of the underground base rescue unit didn't help the situation either.

In any case, she was not cut out to be a military woman.

So Yao Yuan had no choice but to volunteer to join the team of test pilots. Even though his diviner's power wasn't as

powerful as Zhang Heng's or Chou Yue's, his presence should at least be of some use.

It took almost the whole Black Star Unit to persuade him otherwise and let both Ying and Lee handle the test flight.

The first flight test took 6 hours, and thankfully it went without a hitch. Tests on the shuttle's mobility, weapons, energy consumption, and storage were well within the Academy's predicted spectrum. The only exception was the

cannon's firing range, which turned out to be longer than expected.

There were six test flights in total, and other than some minor complications, the shuttle was deemed ready to venture into the junkyard.

"Then it's the matter of deciding who will be going,"

Addressing the Black Star members before him, Yao Yuan continued, "The exploratory

party will consist of 11 to 12 people, and 80 percent of it will involve Homo Evolutis. The shuttle will carry the party into the junkyard, while the Hope will station itself 300 to 500 kilometers away from it.

"There will be four steps to the exploratory mission. First the shuttle will stop at the junkyard's outer layer to collect various metallic samples for the Academy to conduct analysis on them. Hopefully, this will be able to give us more details on the spaceship fleet's technological level. This first step will be incredibly

dangerous, and the team will have to be on constant lookout for signs of danger. We can't tell for certain if the spaceships' defense mechanism has been shut down. Be vigilant for lasers, or high-speed missiles, or even both. In other words, this first step is also to bait out possible attacks..."

"It's incredibly dangerous," Yao Yuan repeated for emphasis.

The seriousness of the topic didn't match the feast stretched out before them, but since Lee

and Ying had completed their last flight test around dinner time, Yao Yuan decided to invite all of his Black Star comrades to gather for dinner while sharing with them the plans for the exploratory mission.

"Since the first step is the most dangerous, I will be leading it myself alongside Zhang Heng and Ying. We will return immediately if Zhang Heng predicts danger," added Yao Yuan.

Here, Guang Zhen interrupted,

"Ol' Capt'n, can't we use the remote-controlled mining airship like how the Academy suggested? Those are controllable within a 1,000 kilometer range, and if the purpose of this first step is to collect materials, the airships are perfect. Plus, it's the safest option."

Yao Yuan shook his head. After taking a bite out of the spring roll on his plate, he elaborated. "The problem is we do not know how advanced this civilization is. We could release 50 of these airships to venture into the junkyard on our behalf when the

Hope is within range, but due to possible radioactive wave interference over long distances, there is a high chance that not only will we lose these airships, they will trigger the spaceships' sleeping defense mechanism as well.

"However! That is the best case scenario. Alan and Bo Li have revealed to me a possibly worse fate. Our intrusion may be handled in the manner I've just described, but that prediction is baseless because at the end of the day, we can't really predict the exact response of a technologically superior race."

Yao Yuan was greeted with pairs of puzzled eyes and hence he continued to explain, "I know it sounds complicated, and I was equally lost when they first approached me with this possibility, but I soon broke out in cold sweat when I understood their perspective. Let me use fishing as an analogy; perhaps that will make it clearer. It is common knowledge between veteran anglers that fish are prone to testing your bait. If you reel in your rod at the first sign of your bobber moving, chances are the fish will escape.

"The experienced angler thus could differentiate between a fake bite and an actual one."

Finishing the rest of his spring roll, Yao Yuan continued, "Similarly, whenever anything approaches us in space, we first analyze it before deciding to fight or flight. If it is a natural entity, like a space rock or asteroid, we avoid it if we can and destroy it if we can't.

"But what if it is something manmade, like a spherical, metal ball? If a round, metal ball

is flying towards us right this moment, what would be our first reaction?"

A thoughtful silence pervaded the room before Ying said firmly, "We would destroy it!"

Yao Yuan nodded, putting weight behind Ying's solution. "I agree, but here lies the problem. We are completely unfamiliar with this metal object, and even if it was giving out constant electrical signals, we would destroy it for safety's sake... But what if it was some sort of peace

treaty from another colony? We would have unwittingly initiated a space war!

"You see, we are the inexperienced angler in the analogy. We would jump right into preemptive action for the sake of safety... But remember, the civilization that formed this junkyard is much more advanced than us. Let's say their scanning technology is advanced enough to be able to easily analyze and dissect electrical signals, and maybe even our communicative structure and meaning. They could come to the fast conclusion that our

mining airships present no threat.

"What would you do if you were this other civilization?"

This time it was Guang Zhen who answered. "Capture it to examine it further and to siphon out more information."

"Indeed." Yao Yuan nodded. "Different civilizations approach the similar problem with widely different solutions depending on its technological era. Guang

Zhen is most likely correct that the opponent would capture our airships to conduct more analysis on them. Of course, since the place is already a junkyard, I'll admit that the chance of this happening is low. Then again, there are still fairly big pieces floating about the area, so one really can't tell. In any case, a wrong step here could lead the Hope to total annihilation.

"And this is not a risk that I'm willing to take. So this plan of using the mining airships will not work. We have to rely on the shuttle, which has

communication functionality
and weapons to complete this
first step.

"So, that concludes the first part of the mission. If all goes well, the second step will be forming a Homo Evolutis team to venture deeper into the junkyard. This team will also be 10 to 12 people in size and similarly, I'll be leading it...

"To find members for this second team, I've decided to organize a specialized unit called [Homo Evolutis Faction](#), specially

designed to train and unlock the potentials of all known and latent Homo Evolutis. Its tasks will be to teach this unique class of people the ways to wield their powers and the accompanying pitfalls.

"This Homo Evolutis Faction's importance can't be understated because... it might be humans' only unit powerful enough to diffuse the threats posed by a more advanced civilization!"

Chou Yue's surname is (任)Ren, which coupled with 性 (Xing) means willfulness, but in Chou

Yue's case refers to a pampered and spoiled attitude.

The author's original term for Homo Evolutis Faction is NewTypeOrgans, which doesn't align with the translator's use of Homo Evolutis. Hence, adjustment has been made.

Chapter 97: Daily Scoop... Baby Boom

Zhang Heng finally got his long-deserved day off.

The day couldn't come soon enough because after his week of training at the rehabilitation center with Ebon, he was dragged to join another week of rehabilitative training regime with Ying, Liu Bai, and Wa Luo. Zhang Heng could sense his spirit escaping his body. He felt he would die under his comrades' hands... After avoiding certain death on Planet

Sahara and the meteorite base, the COD on his autopsy would be death during training.

Zhang Heng would find it humorous if it didn't cost him his life.

Zhang Heng had made multiple appeals for a break and on his third, Yao Yuan, feeling sorry for him, finally approved. He also stopped Zhang Heng's rehabilitative regime and allowed him to join normal training.

It was not that Zhang Heng was not appreciative of his comrades' efforts. He knew they only wanted what was best for him. Having once been so close to death, they wanted him to be physically more resilient so that such a situation would not happen again.

However, that only made Zhang Heng yearn for normal human contact. His heart exploded in happiness when he stepped into the third floor residential area and saw the crowd thronged about him. He felt like a born-again convict on his first day of freedom; he could

barely contain the spring in his step.

Swarming through the crowd, Zhang Heng purchased a copy of Hope Weekly from a roadside stall. Buoyed by his effusive mood, he carelessly flipped through the paper, even laughing out loud when he read the page on jokes. 30 minutes had passed in such a manner before he realized he was on a mission.

"Oops, almost forgot! I need to go to the Civil Affairs Bureau to

get the information I need," Zhang Heng reminded himself as he tapped himself lightly on his head. After folding the paper, he rushed to the bureau, which was situated not far away from the House of Representatives.

Zhang Heng expected the bureau to be empty, but when he arrived, a line of about 200 people was already there. Weirdly enough, almost everyone was carrying a baby or a toddler. The cries of 200 babies ricocheting off the office walls drowned the room in a cacophonous din.

At the same time, within command central, Yao Yuan was in a fistful of rage.

"Are you kidding me?! There have been two more deaths during childbirth within the last week alone?! Since when has our medical technology gotten so low that we have such a high fatality rate during childbirth? I want an answer!"

Yao Yuan slammed the report on the table angrily, venting at Barbie, who stood a distance

away, "According to the court cases issued by the two families, they waited for more than three hours before the doctors came to deliver their babies. How is this possible? The Hope is only so big; how could the doctors have taken more than three hours to reach their families? It doesn't take that long to run from the sixth floor to the first floor. Currently, the Hope's doctors are all military doctors, but I don't think they'll be able to rely on their ranks to weasel out of this. If it is found out that any one of them has slacked and caused the women's death, I will personally execute them myself!"

Unfazed by Yao Yuan's anger, Barbie walked silently to switch the stack of reports Yao Yuan had looked over for a new set before moving calmly towards the door.

Shocked by her lack of response, Yao Yuan asked, "What's this report? And why didn't you comment anything on this gross atrocity?"

Barbie turned around with a defeated look in her eyes, adding, "Captain, the report is

from 10 days ago. You've been ignoring the reports on civil affairs because constructing the Homo Evolutis Faction and issues about the spaceships junkyard has been holding your undivided attention. Unless there is a mention of death, the civil reports are all passed down to the Hall of Innovation and Communications. However, you have to understand that the officers there have no jurisdiction over military matters, like this case with the military doctors."

Frowning, Yao Yuan picked up the new report and started to

read.

The report was a compilation of the many reports written by hospices over the Hope and signed by the main hospital. According to it, there would be a baby boom starting from the month before last and would continue for three to four months. Within the previous month alone, there were 4,000 new babies born on the Hope. The number was predicted to rise to about 10,000 in the coming months. Due to this, the Hope's hospital was seriously understaffed, especially in the field of gynecology. Even the

most experienced gynecologists didn't have the time to fit in two childbirths within 24 hours. In other words, when the monthly birthrate broke the limit of 6,000, it would have greatly surpassed what the Hope's medical unit could possibly handle.

The report appealed to Yao Yuan to figure out an expedient way to handle this issue. Their suggestion was to recruit trainee surgeons or experienced midwives within the public to help tide over the first wave of the baby boom before designing and opening training for a new

generation of medical workers.

Yao Yuan made a silent calculation in his mind. The Hope had left Earth for one year and two months. After taking into account a pregnancy's 10 month period, Yao Yuan was able to discern that the span of increased conception on the Hope started about four to six months after they departed from Earth.

First with the help of his memory and later with a time table, Yao Yuan was able to tell

that was when they were sailing through the nebula. Yao Yuan found that to be reasonable because before that, they were too busy adapting to a new environment. They had just escaped from Earth into space and they needed time to familiarize themselves into the new surroundings. It just so happened that the fever that led the way to the creation of Homo Evolutis also occurred then. Maybe this meant that the superhuman power was a manifestation of man's extreme adaptation to life in space.

Similarly, the number of

pregnancies within that stretch of time was minimal, clocking in at only a measly 1,000 babies per month. The citizens of the Hope were probably too busy worrying about basic survival, leaving no room for marital duties.

The same could be said when they first came across Planet Sahara. They needed another stretch of time to get used to this new discovery. However, since that was man's first discovery of a habitable planet, it had also sown a seed of hope within the people. Maybe with time, and with more warps, they would be

able to locate a new home planet!

These were common human psychology.

There was another crisis following that, but that information was never released to the public. Instead, the Hope had introduced a new currency system, job assimilation, and housing revolution... Yes, the housing revolution!

Weighted down by guilt that

stemmed from carelessness, Yao Yuan slapped himself heavily on his forehead. The responsibility for the two deaths in labor turned out to fall squarely on his shoulders.

The housing revolution had given many families the first taste of privacy ever since they left Earth. A combination of both the news of a new energy source for the Hope and a stable income ushered in a sense of contentment and bliss. It was little wonder that it would lead to a baby boom.

"...This is my oversight." Yao Yuan sighed while standing up. "It's only fair for us to pay the two grieving families a visit. Maybe the government can recompense them somehow, but can we truly make up for the deaths of a mother and her child..."

Yao Yuan sank back down resignedly, adding, "Maybe it's not the best idea to visit them now, but compensation is the least the government can do. See if there's anything the government could help the two families with. Next, we need to solve the understaffed issue.

Their suggestion is fine, so we'll follow that. Have the Hope Weekly publish a recruitment call. Remember to recruit among the military as well. After eliminating the unqualified, have the rest go through a week-long intensive training period. Make sure they have enough field experience before they are allowed to enter the surgery room."

Here, Yao Yuan stopped to ponder some options before declaring, "Other than that, we have to introduce a new welfare policy specifically tailored to this baby boom. This is to make

sure that every baby is well taken care of. I'll leave the actual policy drafting to the Hall of Innovation and Communications, but here are some of my suggestions: first, we have lower the price of milk powder. The team can discuss the exact amount with the experts, but it is my suggestion that we cut the price by half."

"The problem is we don't have enough milk powder in storage for that," Barbie interrupted. "Since dairy products are luxury items, there isn't much of them in storage to begin with. Even with fresh milk, we could only

feed 3,000 to 5,000 babies. This could be easily solved if the mothers breastfeed fully, but since most of the mothers are first time mothers, they need to rely on additional supplements."

"Is that so..?" Yao Yuan stood up to circle the room before adding, "Give every family with a newborn a baby tag. Only those with this baby tag can make milk powder purchases. Also, I need a team of nutritionists to calculate the ratio of milk powder versus breast milk that is optimal for growth so that each family can only purchase that exact amount

every month. Make sure to release all of this information alongside the recruitment call."

While Barbie was typing all of this down, Yao Yuan asked, "Combining both milk powder in storage and daily fresh milk, how long can we last feeding 30,000 babies?"

Barbie expertly added up the tally and said, "Rudimentary calculations puts us at three months, but it could be extended to four to five months if more mothers are able to breastfeed."

"So in the worst case scenario, we have three months." Yao Yuan frowned before continuing firmly, "No matter what, we must ensure this generation of babies grows up healthy and strong. They are the future of the Hope, and this includes the extra 30,000 babies. We must do our best to provide them with the best environment to grow up in. Okay, I'll will order the Workshop to stop all progress on upgrading the second shuttle and channel their efforts towards creating the external cabin so that the new biome space can be completed sooner."

Yao Yuan sat back down, looking at Barbie, and said, "From this day onward, I want you to view all reports about the babies at the same level of importance as all the other military updates. You can approach me with them any time you want and you have to make sure that I reply to them within 24 hours."

Barbie broke into a smile. Giving Yao Yuan a semi-accurate military salute, she waltzed out the door, saying, "You're a good leader..."

"My faith isn't misplaced."

Cause of Death

Chapter 98: A Wave of New Inventions

Bo Li was a quiet girl who preferred her own company. She usually spent her time at the library or in a corner by herself day-dreaming.

Nevertheless, her favorite spot was the laboratory.

Bo Li was one of the Whisperers among the Homo Evolutis. She was able to receive a mysterious voice hinting at the

solution whenever she faced a difficult scientific conundrum. This was possible because the voice helped increase the whisperer's brain activity whenever it appeared. Studies showed that the voice influenced a tenfold increase in brain activity every time it announced itself.

This was in the Homo Evolutis Faction's rudimentary analysis report on the Whisperers.

Viewed from this perspective, the Whisperers could be said to

be the most human among all the Homo Evolutis. Their power was the most similar to common human psychology. The basis could be found in the theory of trial and error. The answer was teased out through a dissection of the problem from multiple angles, and every error brought the Whisperer ever closer to the truth. As it was mentioned before, it was only when man ceased to try that the institution of science would fall.

This was the historical truth. From Newton's law of gravity to the theory of relativity, from classical mechanics to quantum

mechanics, they only came into existence after numerous trials and errors. In other words, to be a good scientist, one had to have a thrill for failure.

Currently, the Academy had pretty much covered all of the available basic fields of science. Granted their total number couldn't rival the number they had when they were still on Earth, being small in number had its own perks. For one, this ensured that the Academy was not divided by countries, race, or politics. Instead, its members were all gathered under one banner. With the collective

strength from all its different fields, the Academy's scientific prowess was equal to 3/4 of America's original scientific contribution, and that was already in itself an impressive feat.

For another, this ensured that the scientific scene remained vibrant. Even though experienced scientists like Alan and Silewei had fixed powerful positions within the Academy, the rest of the administrative ladder was incredibly fluid. Yao Yuan believed that the allure of a better lifestyle from earning promotions would bring the best

out of the members of the Academy. Shining examples of people who started at the bottom but quickly rose to the top were Ivan and Bo Li. Another benefit was that this policy put everyone at a relatively level playing field, so this erased the possibility of workplace bullying.

Currently, the Academy had three main affairs: One, studies on the alien plants and its byproducts, the multiple alloys, and energy crystal. After all, the crystal reactors were an accidental discovery, so they didn't truly understand its

underlying mechanism. Like how it happened in the underground base, it could turn into a liability in an instant. Therefore, the Hope would sleep better at night if the Academy could finally grasp its inner workings.

Two, studies on Homo Evolutis. There were eight formal classes of Homo Evolutis: the Diviner, the Deceiver, the Seeker, the Whisperer, the Anima, the Perceptor, the Thinker, and the All-Rounder. However, the verdict was still out on the validity of the Thinker because the scientists believed that these

were simply people with acute observation and logic.

In any case, these eight were things that defied scientific conventions. Take for an example the Seeker. When Ying used his superpower, he could see 10 times better than a normal human being. In other words, while the rest of us saw moving pictures on the televisions, Ying would see a sequence of changing stills.

His power was not limited to dissecting moving pictures; his

sight could also zoom into measurement as small as 10 nanometers!

Initially, the Academy thought this to be impossible, because it was simply inhuman, but they devised an experiment just to be certain. Using nano-lasers, a random word was scrawled onto a piece of metal. In fact, the word was so small that the technician himself couldn't tell what he had written. Nevertheless, the picture drawn by Ying matched the image that showed up on the microscope perfectly! This stunned the whole Academy, but instead of

stopping them, it sparked a wave of scientific fervor within the community. Hypotheses were tossed around regarding the mechanism of the Homo Evolutis, and the most valid among them all was the theory on brain evolution.

Three, studies on space weaponry.

It was common knowledge on yhe Hope that they were too under-armed to carve a successful way out of the dangerous cosmos.

Ever since their misadventures on Planet Sahara, there had been an unspoken truth bubbling among the citizens of the Hope. They must try their best to avoid contact with other alien civilization.

Their fear wasn't unfounded, because for one, they were forced to step into space at least 100 years before the projected time. Following man's progress in science, they were supposed to start by exploring the Moon or Mars because that was the goal man had set themselves for

the 21st century.

In the 22nd century, a space station was supposed to be in the works. Modifications could be done in stages to improve the functionalities and hospitability of this space station.

In the early 23rd century, after man had gotten used to life in space, efforts for space migration to nearby planets, like Mars, could begin in earnest.

Around the middle of 24th

century, maybe man's technology would improve to such a stage where man could find hospitability at the fringe of the solar system. This would be in preparation for man to leave the safety of the solar system around the end of 25th century. This meant that, according to this schedule, space travelling between galaxies was supposed to be only possible... in the early 27th century!

In other words, the Hope had left Earth around 600 years earlier than scheduled!

100 years difference could mean the difference between safety and death in space, much less 600 years!

Many people on the Hope saw that cruel reality. They knew that space wasn't going to be a paradise, and the presence of a spaceship junkyard had just confirmed their suspicion. It was a harsh place out there in space!

Following the same trajectory, ever since the 12th warp, the cries for more research to be

done in space weaponry were getting louder and louder. Most of it came from famed scientists, Silewei being the movement's most stringent champion. It was his belief that science dictated a civilization's fight or flight instinct. Peace could only be brokered between societies of similar scientific prowess. And currently, with its weak arsenal, the Hope was easy prey.

Therefore, to survive, they needed better weaponry!

To that effect, with Bo Li at the

helm, a weaponry research committee was assembled. Their study was at a turning point, and on the third day after Yao Yuan issued the milk powder limited provision policy, Bo Li barged into command central bearing her team's research result.

"Hmm? Well, isn't this a surprise? Do you need more budget or supplies, Bo Li?" Yao Yuan blurted out, surprised to see Bo Li in his room.

Bo Li shook her head and, without a word, planted herself

on the chair opposite Yao Yuan despite not being given the invitation. Then she spread out on his table a series of files. When her files almost buried his present work, Yao Yuan coughed and asked, "Bo Li, I have more than enough things to deal with already on this table. There're the reports on the baby boom, the external cabin, and also the rumor of a bovine outbreak happening in the biomes... So please, just tell me directly what you need."

Bo Li's mouth twitched into a small smile, adding, "The blueprint for the

electromagnetic tracker you requested is ready, but it still needs a field test on the upgraded shuttle. The Gaussian Weapons on the other hand... are sadly still in their theoretical stages. We have several prototypes ready, but they will need some time before they can be brought into the field. The issue is energy storage. Without fitting it with the newly improved batteries, they are functional for only two minutes."

A silence ensued as Yao Yuan stood up to walk about the room. Then he added, "Your

team has given me more than 10 new weapon types. It has gone way beyond not only my expectations, but also the expectations of the Academy. They say that your team's contributions might be the sign that the scientific renaissance that we're hoping for is coming. Of course, I know your role in bringing about this development couldn't be understated, so... Ning Bo Li, name your needs. I will try my best to provide."

"Robots," replied Bo Li in a calm tone. "Remember the spherical robots that your team demolished at the original

spaceship base, the one back on Earth? I need their carcasses, but it would be best if you could find me some that are still intact. Those robots have internal mechanisms that are closest to the Gaussian technology, and I need them!"

Chapter 99: Catalyst for Science and the Compartment

No one could tell what the catalyst for the next scientific renaissance would be, nor when it would arrive.

For example, the first scientific revolution was brought about by the creation of the steam engine, even though history called it the industrial revolution and tied it to the European cultural renaissance. Then again, hasn't advancements in science always

been linked to great societal improvements?

The one after that was caused by the proliferation of electricity, where new fields based in electronics was introduced.

The next one included the advancement in nanotechnology, space technology, and biological engineering, whose common root could be found in the field of computer science. In other words, it was computer science

that provided the fertile soil on which other contemporary sciences would grow.

Until now, man had been reaping the rewards from this third industrial revolution. Therefore, even though it had been decades after the onset of this revolution, man was still regretfully languishing in it.

So it was little surprise that people were asking... when the next revolution will arrive. And what will be the catalyst that ushers in its arrival.

This was the topic of the day within the Academy. Some argued for biotechnology, others space technology, there was also support for technology in alternative energy and artificial intelligence. Everyone had their own say regarding this matter, but the whole Academy was in agreement that this next revolution will no doubt be potent and influential.

Even Yao Yuan, especially after witnessing the latest wave of new inventions, couldn't resist joining in on the hype. He

wished he could be alive to witness the arrival of this new revolution because... he believed this revolution would finally usher in an age of true cosmic exploration!

Yao Yuan frowned after listening to Bo Li's request before sitting back down, "Since you know about the existence of these robots, then you should know as well that they have been reprogrammed to act as the Hope's last line of defense against threats of non-human origin. Also, since they are controlled by the ship's central mainframe... I can't approve of

your request right now. You have to understand that even a small tweak to their programming... could have a possibly adverse effect on the Hope's overall security."

Bo Li too frowned slightly in return. However, she didn't show any intention of continuing to appeal to Yao Yuan. Instead, she bowed and turned to exit the room.

Yao Yuan, though, called her back, asking, "Bo Li, you have been at the forefront of many

new inventions lately... Could it be that you've already felt the fourth industrial evolution coming? Tell me, are we at the cusp of this next revolution, like how the rest of the Academy has been saying?"

Bo Li stopped and answered without turning around, "...I can't say for certain, but they seem to be correct. I need to conduct more experiments to be sure."

Yao Yuan added, "Will it be related to what you're working

on, Gaussian technology? In other words, will this next revolution be based in electromagnetic technology? If that's true, we will need more supplies, like octane-powered batteries and alternative energy sources, to anticipate this revolution, right?"

Bo Li frowned. "I will say it again, I can't say for certain, and I need to be conduct more experiments to be sure!"

"Is that so?" Yao Yuan sighed. "Alright, I'll give you a reply

within three days."

"Thank you," Bo Li answered, before retreating out of central command. Stopping just before the door, she suddenly added, "There is a shop that sells rice cakes on the third floor C Street. I really like their rice cakes." And with that, she disappeared out the door.

The sudden information had Yao Yuan stunned. He chuckled to himself, and after thinking about it for quite some time, he activated the communicator on

his table, saying, "Tell Zhang Heng, Ying, and Ebon to come meet me at central command."

Three days later, Ying, Ebon, and Zhang Heng, dressed in their smart army fatigues, arrived at Bo Li's weapons laboratory. They had in tow behind them several robot guards and a pile of broken robot pieces.

"Lieutenants Ying, Ebon, and Zhang Heng reporting as observers and protectors of this robotic experiment," Ying

announced, with a sonorous voice to the room of scientists as he took a step forward.

Bo Li glanced at the trio insouciantly before moving past them to inspect the cluster of robots. She first stopped beside the robot guards to take a detailed look at their protective shells before squatting down to look at the pile of robot parts. Finally, she stood up, saying, "Then we shall start the experiment with the robot carcasses..."

(A Diviner to sense danger, a Seeker to record my movements, and a Perceptor to incapacitate me at the shortest notice if necessary... So be it. I've told him I've no ulterior motives, and I happen to love the Hope, but I suppose Dad was right; the man holds high mistrust of other people...) With that, Bo Li's experiment began in earnest. On the other hand, Yao Yuan's milk powder purchase limitation policy was thankfully accepted by the citizens without much of an uproar. In fact, before the baby boom, many people had stopped purchasing milk powder on account of its high price, so this didn't affect them much.

With an addition of 1,000 new doctors, the following wave of baby boom was efficiently solved. Thus far, the Hope's population had increased to a total of 140,000 people. Among them, 16,000 newborn babies. There were 15,000 scheduled childbirths in the upcoming two months, and that would kick the Hope's population to go over the 150,000 line!

Nevertheless, it was not all good news because the increase in population meant a decrease in living space.

Civil engineers pointed out that the Hope had a maximum capacity of 220,000 people. The biomes wouldn't be able to support a higher population than that, so people would have to starve if the number of inhabitants went over the capacity. The population increase also brought more pressure on the ship's air and water recycling systems.

Human needs sufficient private space to move around in to grow and flourish. Being boxed in a limited space will stunt both

physical and spiritual growth. Adequate space is a valid need alongside a satisfying job, sufficient relaxation, and food. At this point, the Hope stumbled into a situation where it was lacking in these four.

The Hope was simply... too small!

However, Yao Yuan knew that he couldn't sign off a policy that discouraged childbirth, because that was in gross violation of basic human rights. Furthermore, practically

speaking, the Hope needed this new generations to keep humanity's hope burning. If there was a 1-child-per-family policy, the quality of the gene pool on the Hope would dramatically decrease. As inbreeding became more common, the future generations would get weaker and weaker.

Experts concluded that sufficient living space and stable population number were the two main factors deciding man's fate in space.

"Looks like plans to construct that external cabin have to continue."

The idea of an external cabin was brought up by multiple experts in response to the increase in population.

It was their expert opinion that not only could the external cabin be used to house more biomes, it could be a successful prototype that could be copied to construct future cabins. With the addition of these cabins, the Hope's space issue would be resolved because

these cabins could be repurposed into housing units.

Simultaneously, the experts had pointed out the irrationality within Yao Yuan's decision to conduct continuous warps.

Currently, the Hope could warp 400 times. If one totaled up the three days that were spent after every warp, the time would add up to about 4 years.

That number didn't align with the amount of time the Hope

could survive independently in space, which was 40 years. So after exhausting all the energy in warps, what would the Hope do for the remaining 36 years? Become an aimless space nomad?

Therefore, the experts suggested that instead of a three day stay, they stay for a whole month whether or not there was anything worth sticking around for. They could also use the 30 days to let the external cabins out as some plants had a 30 days harvest cycle. In the future, more cabins could be added to provide the much needed

housing space.

Housing arrangements could be cycled after each warp so that every family would be given its turn to spend a month out on the external cabin. With this system in place, the Hope's maximum population could increase to a staggering 500,000 people. It could fit two generations of people. If the Hope was destined to perish 40 years later, at least then man would have lasted long enough to build a new spaceship.

Just when Yao Yuan was discussing matters of the external cabins with a panel of experts, Bo Li's team sent over a new report.

The report wasn't about her team's experiment success, nor was it about any accidents, but rather her team had intercepted a stray signal issued by the group of intact robots. However, weirdly enough, the signal wasn't targeted at the ship's central mainframe but instead... at the compartment below the mainframe!

According to the Hope's blueprint, that space should be a slab of metallic flooring, and it wasn't supposed to be hollow. But since the target of the signal was there... something must lie within that compartment!

Chapter 100: UFO!

As the ship's captain, one would expect Yao Yuan to be familiar with everything there was to know about the Hope. In fact, when they first acquired the Hope, Yao Yuan spent days poring over the spaceship's blueprints because he felt it was his responsibility to do so.

However, Yao Yuan was as equally blind sighted as everyone else with regards to this unexpected development. So when news came that there was a mysterious object hiding

underneath the Hope's central mainframe, he sat sweating profusely in his seat.

"How could I have been so careless...?"

After immediately excusing himself from his discussion with the panel of experts, he called for his Black Star members to join him at the central mainframe. As Wa Luo joined him mid-sprint, he yelled, "Even though we have done a thorough search around the Hope, we've forgotten about one important

thing!"

Wa Luo, who was still out of the loop, asked in return, "And what is that?"

"Hazard inspection! Specifically, we didn't scout for the possibility of internal explosives!"

Yao Yuan added grimly, "Let's not forget who we're dealing with... the original owners of this ship were politicians that were as slimy as snakes. If they

could be heartless enough to abandon Earth in secret, would they really leave such a perfect ship for the rest of us to find? It is not beyond them to sabotage this ship with explosives out of spite!"

Wa Luo was not only taken aback by this new information but also by Yao Yuan's anger. He had never seen his captain so angry before.

Yao Yuan was envisioning all sorts of torture devices that he would have at the ready for this

group of government officials if they were unlucky enough to fall into his clutches. He believed there was an 80 percent chance that there were indeed explosives buried under the mainframe. It fitted the officials' modus operandi too perfectly! Similar to Wa Luo, the people around Yao Yuan could feel waves of anger emanating from their captain as they parted for the pair to pass.

The Hope's central mainframe was situated at the center of the fifth floor Barracks. It was a highly secure area with 24 hour patrol. The patrol team of 25

members wouldn't allow anyone other than Yao Yuan and Guang Zhen to enter easily. A lot of forms needed to be filled to gain entry, and even so, said person or group had to be followed by six guards at all times within the room.

Such high security was warranted because this place was the brain and heart of the Hope. It dictated everything from the ship's anti-gravitational system to its communication channels.

When Yao Yuan arrived at the central mainframe room, Ying, Ebon, Bo Li, and Zhang Heng were already there. Since they were the ones who sent Yao Yuan the news, they knew of the seriousness of the situation because if Yao Yuan didn't know about this mysterious object, then it must be the previous owner that left it there. Knowing the group of slimy politicians, it was highly unlikely that this was something harmless...

Spotting Yao Yuan, their tense facial features relaxed and they sighed in relief. Yao Yuan, who

was still tense, walked up to the four of them and quickly asked, "Who spotted this signal? And has the nature of this signal been deciphered?"

Without hesitation, Bo Li stepped forth to reply, "It was me who first found the signal. It has gone unnoticed for so long because it was technically still heading towards the central mainframe. However, when I was checking the issue of signal delay in the group of robots, I realized that there was an additional hidden stream of signals heading below where the mainframe was supposed to be.

After that, I instantaneously filed for a request to enter this room."

"Yes, I've received your request and approved it." Yao Yuan nodded. "So, did your team find anything? Were they able to tell the location this hidden signal is heading towards?"

Pointing at a spot below the central mainframe, Bo Li confirmed, "Yes, the receiving point of the signal is in the interlayer beneath the central mainframe."

For a matter as serious as this, Yao Yuan wanted an extra opinion. Therefore, in the following few hours, he ordered several experts to conduct an isolated analysis on the signals issued by the set of robots. Their result confirmed Bo Li's discovery. They also tracked the signal to the interlayer beneath the central mainframe!

"I need your help in confirming two points," said Yao Yuan, to the group of experts. "Since I'm no computer expert, first I want you to tell me if it's possible to

gain access to this interlayer without shutting down the mainframe.

"And secondly, if it's impossible and the central mainframe is definitely going to suffer damage for us to get to the bottom of this... can the damage be repaired by the Workshop?"

The group of experts Yao Yuan directed his questions toward were the Hope's best experts in computer software and hardware engineering. Some of them were even parts of the

teams that were responsible for the multitudes of apps that defined the 21st century. Others were instrumental in building top government agencies' supercomputers.

Since they had previously checked the central mainframe, when Yao Yuan asked, the leading expert replied swiftly, "Captain, regarding your first question, as long as we're careful during the dismantling process, it should be fine. There is nothing important under the mainframe other than electrical circuits, so if we follow the ship's construction blueprint

closely, we should be able to avoid harming the wiring."

"About your second point though..." The expert massaged the back of his head and looked at his colleagues with distress in his eyes before finally adding, "In other words, you're asking if we could construct another central mainframe if irreparable damage was done to this one. Sadly, that is currently impossible. This mainframe here is the collective contribution of the best minds in computer science across the globe. It is not something we can replicate at the moment. Sorry

to say, but if there's damage even to just some of its crucial parts, the Workshop will be unable to provide any replacements."

Yao Yuan had expected this answer, but to have it confirmed was still a huge disappointment. Even if this current mainframe ended up unscathed through this project, the fact that the Hope still couldn't conduct any repairs on it would arise as a problem sooner or later.

Yao Yuan believed firmly in the edict: hope for the best but

prepare for the worst. And that was how Yao Yuan had been drafting his policies.

(Looks like I have to send more people to the IT department after this... Sigh, but from where?) The irony of the situation had Yao Yuan laughing bitterly to himself. He had, on one hand, a burgeoning crisis in population overload, and the other, a deficiency in skilled workers.

In any case, he had to first focus on the issue in front of him, and

that was to dismantle the base of the central mainframe and find out what this mysterious object was...

With the aid of the construction blueprint that Yao Yuan pulled from the mainframe itself, the group of engineers spent eight hours carefully unlocking the interlayer beneath the mainframe. Contrary to what was pictured on the blueprint, they found underneath it... a hidden cache, a space about seven or eight meters wide and similarly tall. Placed within this cache was... a silver, metallic

sphere.

The sphere had a diameter of about three or four meters, and surprisingly, a few wirings from the central mainframe were connected to it. However, there were no noticeable points of interception; the wires seemed to be melted seamlessly into the sphere.

This finding had everyone slack-jawed, and it was not only because the sphere had a weird appearance but also... it floated freely in the air without

assistance. And when they moved closer to look, they realized that it was slowly spinning as well.

"What is this?" Wa Luo said what was in everyone's mind. Faced with this mysterious ball, he turned around to Yao Yuan, adding, "Ol' Cap'n, I don't think I'm needed here, because even if this is a bomb, I have no idea how to defuse it."

"No... you're right, this isn't a bomb..."

Yao Yuan mumbled as he stared transfixedly at this metallic ball. But slowly, a wide smile broke on his face. In fact, when he first laid eyes on the strange sphere, he almost fainted from a rush of sudden euphoria. With a glint in his eyes, he started swaying uncontrollably, overwhelmed by an indescribable sense of joy. If he was forced to find a comparison, he would say it was like a blue-collar worker stumbling across a 50,000,000 US dollar jackpot. He was that happy!

He laid his hand on Guang Zhen's shoulder and leaned into

him for support. Finally, when the light-headedness from joy had passed, Yao Yuan said, in an uncharacteristically giddy voice,

"This... this is a UFO. The one the US government found crashed in Tennessee, the source of power that was responsible for this ship's anti-gravitational systems and space-warping technology...

...The thing that started this crazy journey!"

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